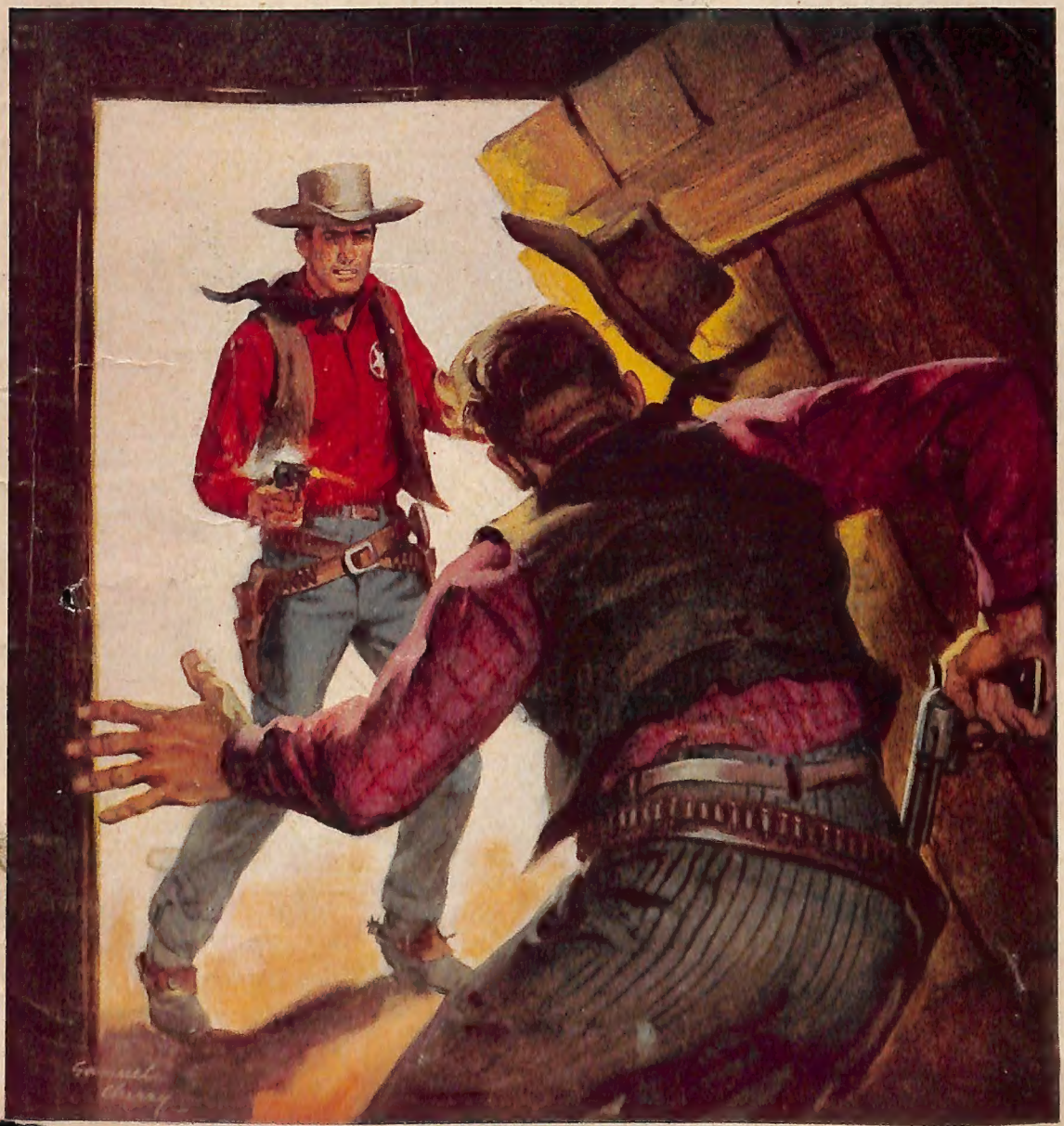
BOOMERANG, an unforgettable Western story, by Joe Archibald

JUNE
25¢

TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

1457



...ATURING: **KILLERS OF SAN ROSA** By JACKSON COLE

...vere fast gunmen out to nail Hatfield's hide to the door

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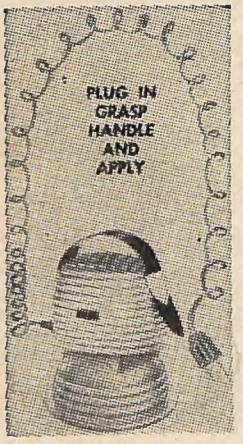

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EVERY STORY IN THIS ISSUE BRAND NEW

TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

VOL. 67, No. 1 JUNE, 1957

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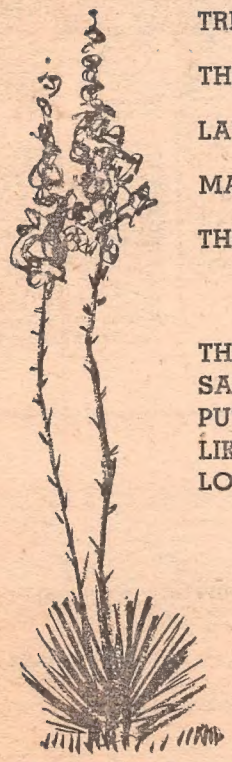
JIM HENDRYX, JR., Editor



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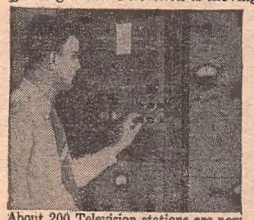

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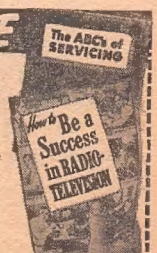
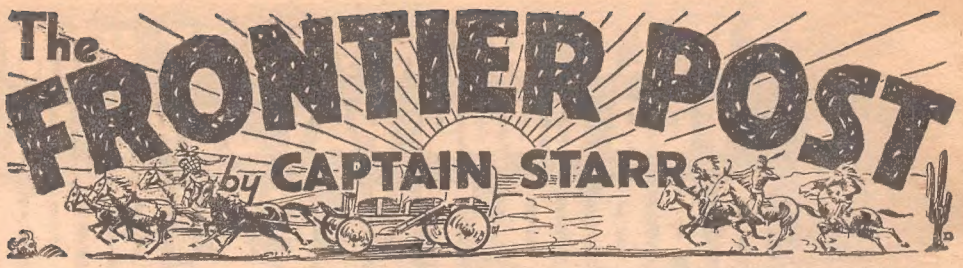




Silent Death of the Frontier

THERE was a much-used expression among the trail blazers of the Southwest's longhorn era:

"If it can't be fixed with rawhide, it ain't worth fixing."

One fiercely proud Texan declared that he had been born in a rawhide covered bed, rocked in a cradle made of rawhide, punished with a stinging rawhide strap, and fed the bluish milk from half a dozen longhorn cows.

The chances were, too, that he was buried in a rawhide coffin. Rawhide coffins were not rare in the Southwest. During a cholera epidemic in San Antonio, in the late 1840's, hundreds of victims were buried in rawhide coffins, because there was not enough lumber to build the more conventional kind.

Use of hides for this purpose highlights an unpleasant aspect of the material often called Mexican iron—as a means of torture and silent death.

One Texas rancher, harrassed by rustling, caught a brand-blotter in the act. With his rifle on the rustler, the irate rancher forced the man to shoot the animal he had been branding and then skin it. Before finishing the task, the rustler realized with horror what the rancher had in mind. He begged for mercy.

Later, the gruesome climax of the affair was revealed. The rancher had securely sewed the rustler in the rawhide. A hot sun had done the rest. The constricting skin had literally crushed the man.

Somewhat less gruesome was the method used by Pancho Villa to obtain confessions or mete out punishment. The leader of the Mexican revolt would have strips of water-softened rawhide tightly bound around victim's heads. Forced to stand in the sun, the prisoners would scream with pain as the thongs contracted.

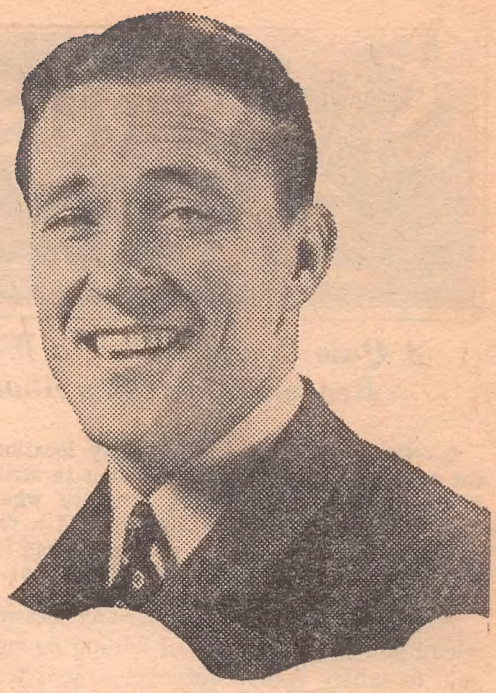
A torture rack made of rawhide was used in Mexico and in several South American countries. Softened or green rawhide strips were tied to the prisoner's legs and arms with the other ends tied to stakes or rocks. Thus spread-eagled on a hot rock, the victim was subject to a gradual constriction similar to the torture racks of Spain.

The Yaqui Indians had a variation of this torture rack which was even more horrifying. They added a rattlesnake to the picture—securing the reptile a short distance from the victim's face. Then, prodding the snake into a frenzy, the torturers would begin to drop water upon the snake's thong. Each vicious lunge of the reptile would stretch the rawhide, with the strikes coming ever nearer the prisoner's face. And in time—the final act when the snake's fangs found their mark.

Just how skilled the *vaqueros* and *soldados* were in using rawhide as weapons was tragically brought out time after time during the Mexican War. Scores of Texans died from strangulation by rawhide ropes and whips. "Silent death," it was termed, and eventually the military authorities made it a crime for any Mexican, whether considered friendly or not, to possess a rawhide rope or whip.

The taming of the West would have been much slower without rawhide. It is doubtful, however, that its use as a means of "silent death" contributed in any beneficial way.

Do You Laugh Your Greatest Powers Away?



THOSE STRANGE INNER URGES

You have heard the phrase, "Laugh, clown, laugh." Well, that fits me perfectly. I'd fret, worry and try to reason my way out of difficulties — all to no avail; then I'd have a hunch, a something within that would tell me to do a certain thing. I'd laugh it off with a shrug. I knew too much, I thought, to heed these impressions. Well, it's different now—I've learned to use this inner power and I no longer make the mistakes I did, because I do the right thing at the right time.

This FREE BOOK Will Prove What Your Mind Can Do!

Here is how I got started right. I had heard about hypnosis revealing past lives. I began to think there must be some inner intelligence with which we were born. In fact, I often heard it said there was; but how could I use it, how could I make it work for me daily? That was my problem. I wanted to learn to direct this inner voice, master it if I could. Finally, I wrote to the Rosicrucians, a world-wide fraternity of progressive men and women, who offered to send me, without obligation, a free book entitled *The Mastery of Life.*

That book opened a new world to me. I advise *you* to write today and ask for your copy. *It will prove to you* what your mind can demonstrate. Don't go through life laughing your mental powers away. Use the coupon below or write: Scribe Z.P.M.

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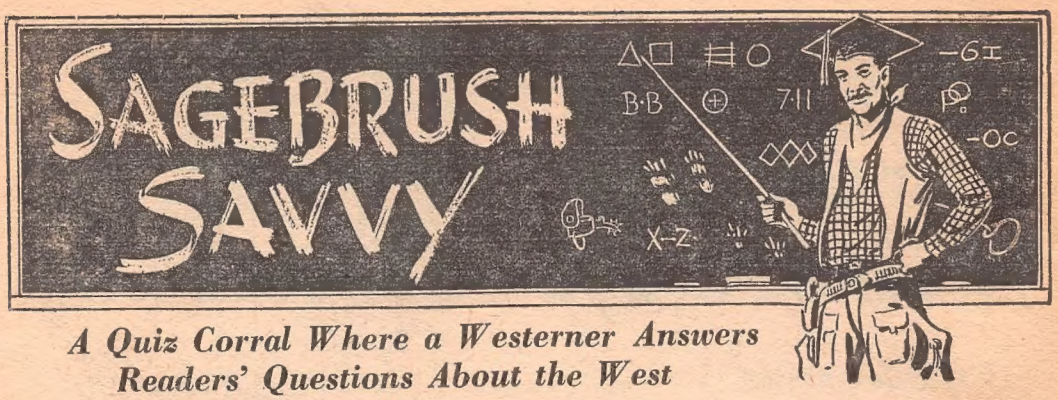

A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—Can you tell me some likely locations for panning a little placer gold—not to strike it rich, just work over old territory where there might be enough leavin's to add a few dollars now and then to my retirement pension and enjoy an outdoor life.—W.S.K. (Ohio).

A.—While I can't name you any location where you would be sure of finding enough gold to satisfy your requirements, it is true that some panning goes on, with occasional moderate payoff, in the vicinity of many old time gold camps such as Elizabethtown, Hillsboro, Mogollón, Silver City, Monticello, in New Mexico; Grass Valley, Coloma, Tuttletown in California; Central City, Cripple Creek in Colorado; Helena, Virginia City, in Montana; Tonopah, Virginia City in Nevada; Deadwood, in South Dakota, and doubtless elsewhere.

Q.—Who is president of the American Hereford Breeders' Association? — A.L.G. (Ga.).

A.—Ranchman Albert Mitchell of Albert, N. M., is president for 1957 and the outfit's name is simply American Hereford Association.

Q.—In traveling out West would it be all right for me to dig up a few cactus plants along the highway to take home?—J.S. (N.J.).

A.—In most Western states it is against the law to remove any flower bearing plant (which all cacti are) from a highway right of way. But by asking permission of ranch owners in cactus country, I feel sure you could dig all the cactus plants you might want on private land.

Q.—What state or territory holds the record for the most hangings by Vigilantes in the wild and woolly days of the west?—I.G. (S.C.).

A.—There are no records by which the number of Vigilante hangings in any given area could be determined, but my guess would be Texas, due to its size and the longer period during which much of it was open range cow country.

Q.—I read somewhere that Davy Crockett was once an outlaw. Is this true?—E.N.D. (Wash. D.C.).

A.—The famous Davy Crockett who was among the Texas heroes killed at the Alamo was never an outlaw, though probably so considered by the Mexican government, along with thousands of other Texans fighting for their independence. However, there was a cowboy named Davy Crockett in New Mexico who, rightly or wrongly, was suspected and accused of rustling and other outlawry along with his gunfighting pal, Clay Allison, of Cimarrón.

Q.—Are there any standing trees in the Petrified Forest of Arizona, or any of the others?—A.E.J. (Iowa).

A.—If you mean standing petrified trees, no, though there are many sizable stumps.

Reader Kenneth Radlaff, R.R. 2, Box 70, Juneau, Wis., would like to buy back issues of TEXAS RANGERS dated prior to 1950. Please write him if you have any.

———*S. Omar Barker*

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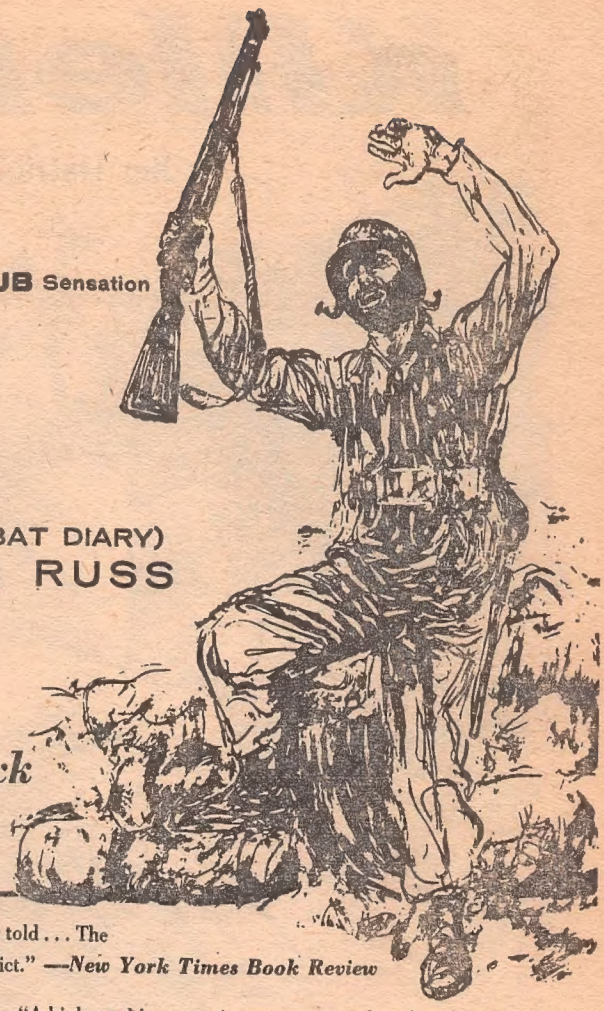
BY MARTIN RUSS



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"One of the most gripping stories of combat ever told . . . The best war journal to come out of the Korean conflict." —*New York Times Book Review*

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NEWSSTAND TODAY!

Killers of

A Jim Hatfield Novel by JACKSON COLE

Hatfield stepped out and threw a shot at the man riding a steeldust bronc

San Rosa

The missing Ranger had gone bad, they said, and high-tailed it with the loot of his prisoner, but the Lone Wolf had his doubts

CHAPTER I

Take Your Pick

THE burial ground, with its carelessly placed wooden markers, was sprawled on a bleak hillside just off the old stage road that strung toward the cattle town of Kelso Springs. One lone scrubby pine, battered and almost uprooted by the winds that swept down from the buttes was its only landscaping. Men buried here had been strangers in the land and had died before their reputations could be fully judged. Boot hill was reserved for those who had proven their badness, and in the community cemetery at Kelso Springs there slept only those people whose goodness had been beyond question.

Four riders came around the prow of a saw-toothed ridge, the rattle of bit-chains and the soft beat of their horses' hoofs magnified by the midnight stillness. A watery three-quarter moon spread a yellowish-blue light over the land. Its brilliance struck against the face of one of the wooden slabs, not yet warped

by the wind and sun and rain, and boldly brought out black-painted letters that had long since begun to fade.

The three riders drew rein when they drew abreast of the burial ground. One of them coughed nervously and said, "A hell of a time to pick to dig up a dead man."

The man on the big sorrel stud, taller in the saddle than the others, rode up the slope to the cluster of graves and slipped out of the saddle. His shoulders were wide; they tapered down to a lean flat waist and slim hips where the brass shells in his cartridge belt glinted in the moonlight. The handles of his Peacemakers, carried low in their holsters, were smooth with use and plainly told a story of long and lonely trails, violence, and death.

Jim Hatfield, Texas Ranger, leaned into the slope, and walked up to a mound of earth where the wiry grass was growing thick. He read the badly spaced letters, that said: JOHN SUGDEN, TEXAS RANGER, OR HARRY DOBIE—TAKE YOUR PICK. His eyes, as green as jade, took on an angry smokiness. He heard a labored breathing behind him and knew it was Ed McSantry, the fat sheriff from Kelso Springs.

Without turning, he said coldly, "Your handiwork, Sheriff?"

McSantry caught the brittle inflection in Hatfield's voice and he stuttered over his answer. When the Lone Wolf turned his hard gaze fully upon him, he blurted out, "No way of telling, was there? Just a heap of bones. It had to be one or the other."

"Nothing funny should occur to a man in a graveyard," Hatfield snapped, his strong dark face pulled tight. He shouldered the sheriff aside and turned to the other man, the Kelso Springs undertaker, Matt Prothro. "Give the sheriff one of the shovels," he said. "Start digging."

He stared down at the grave, hoping that something he had come to look for would not be there, an old break in a man's leg just above the ankle bone. Captain Bill McDowell had told him before he had left Austin that John Sugden had once been thrown from a horse, and the fracture had been a compound one. The skeleton, the Austin paper had said, had been found fully intact, although worn shiny smooth by the wash of the stream that ran through the rocky narrow ravine.

McSantry and the undertaker began their grim task of exhuming the body. The ground was soft and they made rapid progress. Hatfield stood by, recalling what Prothro had told him when he had arrived in the cattle town.

"A hole in the back of the skull, Hatfield. The bullet was still rattling around inside, but we left everything as it was before we put the remains in the pine box."

The bite of the shovels and the hard breathing of the diggers began to tug at the Lone Wolf's usually iron nerves. From some distance away a dog, running loose, howled at the moon, and a weird, soughing sound came down off the high places as the night wind kept rising.

The sheriff drew the brim of his hat down over his puffy eyes to guard them from driving particles of sand. He spat out the stub of a cold cigar and gestured with impatience.

"How can a man, even a Ranger, tell one bunch of bones from another, Hatfield? It don't make sense. What do you expect to find?" McSantry asked.

The Lone Wolf ignored the lawman's griping, and knelt down when the point of a shovel banged hollowly against the wooden coffin. A sliver of wood flew close to his head.

The undertaker said, "I never figured I'd buried the box this deep." He kept shoveling. Finally he gasped, "One thing, it'll be easy to lift out. Lend a hand here, Ed."

A few minutes later, Jim Hatfield, his skin beginning to crawl, examined the leg bone of a skeleton, his fingers sliding along the hard lump where bones had knit together. He placed it gently down, troubled by both a feeling of sadness and a small whispering voice of doubt. He straightened, his darkly-weathered face turned suddenly somber. He took three

steps forward and kicked over the wooden marker, then turned toward Prothro.

"You can bury him again," he said bleakly.

McSantry said, "What did you find, Hatfield?"

"Nothing," the Lone Wolf lied.

"Like they said," the sheriff remarked sourly, "Sugden and Harry Robie stole that outlaw loot. Now who was it that got away?"

"Like they said," the Lone Wolf angrily mocked. "Saying never proved a thing, McSantry. Why is it that men, the good as well as the bad, are sometimes pleased to hear that there are crooked Rangers?" He glared at the sheriff, stared the fat man's eyes to the ground. "John Sugden's reputation was the best!"

"I meant no offense, Hatfield," the sheriff said in a small voice, but the Lone Wolf had turned away and was walking down the grade toward Goldy, his sorrel horse.

In the moonglow Goldy's hide shimmered as if dusted with gold. The horse was a thoroughbred with almost human instincts, an animal that shattered theories that a horse was simply a dumb creature of habit. Jim Hatfield was the only man Goldy would allow on his back.

Goldy nickered when he came close, and swung around to nudge his shoulder. The horse seemed to be telling him to get away from this place of death.

The coffin was once more placed in the grave and covered over. Hatfield got into the saddle and rode back to Kelso Springs, assembling the fragments of an old story of outlawry in his mind, one that had left a black mark against the Texas Rangers.

JIM HATFIELD

THERE had been a reign of terror in the shadows of the Guadulupes at the time, and the wild bunch rode unchecked. Captain McDowell had sent John Sugden, one of his oldest friends, and two other Rangers down from Austin to check the violence and run the ring-leaders down. Sugden had been in Kelso Springs alone when outlaws had ridden in one night and killed a cattle buyer and robbed him of over thirty thousand dollars.

Two riders from the Nine K Ranch, not far from the town, had ridden out of Kelso Springs with Sugden, hard on the heels of the outlaws. One was named Harry Robie, the other simply known as Nevada. A posse had followed them almost an hour later, and gunshots had led it to an old adobe ruin. The two outlaws and the cowpuncher named Nevada were found dead. There was not a sign of either Ranger John Sugden or Harry Dobie, or the missing money.

The story built up and had kept growing. It became a pyramid of wild conjec-

ture, but the foregone conclusion was that either a Ranger or a cowhand had made off to distant places with a small fortune. The law had long since given up the search, and the violence had been forgotten until the finding of the skeleton high in the hills.

Only by accident had Captain McDowell seen the three paragraph story in the Austin newspaper the editors had not deemed important enough for the front page. "Better ride on down there, Jim," McDowell had said. "The trip might not prove a thing, yet still it might. John Sugden was a good man. I'll never believe there was a crooked bone in his body unless it was the one he busted himself."

Jim Hatfield rode into Kelso Springs, the positive identification of Sugden's remains affording him little or no satisfaction, for it in no way had given proof of a Ranger's innocence. His eyes brushed each side of the wide street as he rode in; this town was only a counterpart of hundreds of others he had ridden in or through.

He rode up to Adlum's stable where he prodded a hostler out of a loud fit of snoring. The man got to his feet and was about to turn his displeasure loose when his sleepy eyes suddenly became fully awake. Deep respect cooled the fire in them.

"Oh, it's you, Ranger," he said. "Some bronc you have there and no mistake. I'll take special care of him, friend."

"Do that, and you can call me that," Hatfield said, and ran his hand over the sorrell's withers. He turned abruptly and left the stable.

The hour was late, yet half a dozen horses were hipshot at the tie-rail in front of the saloon labeled, THE SUNDANCE. The lights in the place were fully ablaze. Three men came out of the place as he walked past on his way to the hotel and immediately he caught a furtiveness in their drink and trail-reddened eyes as they paused and gave him a sharp scrutiny.

Slopers, he knew, hailing from anywhere, their destinations doubtful. He thought of Sheriff McSantry, a smile flickering at the corners of his wide mouth. These men were reasonably safe in Kelso Springs.

He got his key at the hotel desk and went upstairs to his room. He saw no reason why, that by this time tomorrow he shouldn't be on his way back to Austin. His mission, unsatisfying as it had been, would be finished as soon as he had talked with Gird Drysdale, owner of the Nine K ranch.

He stripped to his waist and washed, and was reaching for the towel when his eyes caught the scrawled writing on the plaster wall just over the old commode. The humor he possessed but seldom displayed turned the corners of his mouth up. "Better rope the livestock in the bed before you rest your weary head. Hondo Bill."

Jim Hatfield blew out the lamp and went to the window. Sliding up the cracked and faded shade, he saw there were only two horses left in front of The Sundance. When he fell into the rickety bed, he heard the light run of horses and the drunken laugh of a rider. A few moments later he was sound asleep save for a sixth sense that was ever alert and which had saved his life more than once. His Pacemakers were on the chair next to his bed, within easy reach.

Halfway to noontime, the Lone Wolf came out of the restaurant next to the hotel and was about to step off the walk when a voice said, "Ranger!" and brought him up short.

He swung around with the quickness of a big cat, for there were many men he had met in the past with reasons to remember him, and not with any degree of friendliness. The man on the walk nearly lost his footing as he took two backward steps.

"Hold it, friend!" he said, and grabbed for a wooden post supporting one end of a planked awning. "I guess that was a crazy thing to do."

Hatfield smiled. "Came kind of sudden, stranger," he said.

The man in front of him was barrel-chested and nearly as tall as himself. His

rugged face was the color of burnished leather, and crows feet fanned out from either side of his sharp blue eyes. He wore a gunbelt under his store coat and the stem of a pipe stuck up from the band of his ten-gallon hat.

"I'm Gird Drysdale, Hatfield. Heard awhile ago you was aiming to ride out to the Nine K to see me. If McSantry had any brains to remember with he could have told you I stayed in town overnight. Figure you want to ask me about that bunch of bones I heard you had dug up last night."

"Just a question or two, Drysdale," the Lone Wolf said.

Then both men turned their attention to a rider going by. He was slack in the saddle, and there was a film of alkali dust over his clothes and on the buckskin he rode. He turned his face to the walk, and Hatfield saw that the man's eyes were sunk deep from weariness. A dark stubble covered the lower part of his hawk-like face.

Drysdale said, "Another one. Lot of spooks have been passing through lately. They stop over just long enough to get drunk or killed." He touched the Lone Wolf on the arm. "We can talk private in The Sundance, Hatfield."

CHAPTER II

"Proceed to Alpine!"

FOLLOWING the rancher into the saloon, Hatfield glanced back over his shoulder and saw the single rider turn into a narrow side-street where the blacksmith had his forge. Even from this distance he could be certain. The signs were all there. Gunman. He followed Drysdale to the bar.

The rancher said, "Maybe it's too early for a drink, Hatfield."

"Sure is," the ranger said and grinned. "Drysdale, what was this Harry Robie like?"

"Run of the mill cowhand, Hatfield. He fancied himself qiute a ladies man. It looks like he and that ranger, Sugden, fought over that outlaw money, and only one rode away. The facts seem to stand, don't they?"

"Truth," the Lone Wolf said bitterly, "outlaws itself at times. It can hide away for days or months or years, and then it comes on out."

Drysdale bit off the tip of a cigar and spat it toward the cuspidor. "I'm not much of a philosopher, Hatfield. That Harry Robie now, I remember he kept pestering a nester's daughter over by Gratz's Creek. One night the girl's brother caught Robie pulling her into his arms. Robie got a charge of buckshot along his ribs and he was laid up for nearly two weeks. The nester girl and her family moved away soon after."

"Robie didn't shoot back?" the Lone Wolf asked.

"He wasn't much with a gun as I recall."

"Maybe only up pretty close to a man," Jim Hatfield said tightly. "With his back to him."

The picture as men painted it was still an ugly one. Facts could seldom be discounted, but he was certain that John Sugden had had no part in connivery. He also knew that the man's innocence might never be proven.

"Well, that's about it, Drysdale," he said, and kicked his chair back. He was hardly on his feet when he sensed that the street outside had suddenly become deathly still, even for this time of day.

A voice hoarsely yelled, "You can't run, Quarterone!"

Three townspeople burst into the Sundance. One called out, "Is McSantry here? There's going to be some shooting and killing out there!"

"You're a ranger," Drysdale said. "A lawman. Isn't the whole state your jurisdiction?"

The Lone Wolf snapped, "Who pays your sheriff and what for?"

But Jim hurried across the room and out to the planked walk Adlum's stable

was almost directly across the way. A man was backed up against its one dirty window, his eyes under his wide-brimmed black hat feverishly bright in their dark pools. His feet were planted wide apart, his right held low and a little away from his tied-down holster. His cowhide vest with the one big patch of white identified him as the trail-beaten man who had come into town a short while ago. There was another man in the street, short and wiry, his back to Jim Hatfield, and his stance was grimly significant.

"When you're ready, Quarterone!" the man taunted. "How is your memory? Remember Joe Spain? I'm his brother, Earl."

"It was a fair fight!" cried the man who was back up against Adlum's stable. Then the Lone Wolf saw the other gunfighter shouldered against the corner of a building not twenty yards from the stable.

"This is a cold deck, damn your yellow soul!" Quarterone yelled, and drew before the words cleared his throat.

Hatfield jumped to the side and laid a shot against the man coming away from the corner building and sent him reeling and screaming back on his heels. The man in the street had fired, too late, and he was pitching forward on his face. The bullet from his Colt kicked dried mud up from the street.

The gunman called Quarterone, the smoking sixgun in his hand, stared at Hatfield for several long moments, then came away from Adlum's eating up the distance in long, measured strides. A relieved and wicked grin warped his dark, angular face. The Lone Wolf could not recall having seen a more deadly pair of eyes. They gleamed like pebbles at the bottom of a shallow and icy mountain stream.

"I'm obliged, Mister," the gunman said.

"I have a horse in that stable," the ranger said stonily. "A flying bullet might have gone through that window and hit Goldy, who's worth more than all the gunfighters in the country. And even a dog is entitled to a fair chance, Quarterone."

The gunhawk's eyes flared with deep rage, and then they suddenly cooled when he looked at Hatfield's hands. He suddenly remembered a draw that had been faster than anything he had ever seen, one he had caught out of the corner of his eye as he triggered his own gun.

"Anyway, I owe you my life," he said, no longer arrogant, but plainly fearful. "Dammit, man, haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

"I could have been there," the Lone Wolf said, his pale green eyes flashing. "Saddle up and get out of town, Quarterone!" He turned his back on the man and stepped back to the walk, and saw Sheriff McSantry in the crowd gathered in front of the Sundance. "Better get that dead man out of the sun, Sheriff," he said, some contempt in his voice. "And see how bad the other jigger was hit. I didn't shoot to kill him."

"I sure appreciate your help, Ranger," McSantry said, and Hatfield's jaws tightened as he swung his head around. The gunman, however, was well out of earshot, and he let himself get loose again. "Hell," McSantry blustered apologetically, "A man can't be everywhere at once, can he?"

JIM HATFIELD grinned. "Well, almost, Sheriff. You're built for it," and abruptly he started across the street.

He casually glanced at the dead gunman who was being lifted up by Prothro, the undertaker, and another man, and he wondered why his kind continued to believe that they would be the last man to stand. He went to the stable, and saw that the hostler had combed and brushed Goldy to a shiny sleekness.

"Kind of wish you was sticking around for awhile, Ranger," the hostler said, betraying a sad lack of teeth. "Some mighty tough hardcases pass through here. Them that don't get shot like that last poor fellow seem to be heading for the same place."

"Any idea where that is?" Hatfield asked.

The hostler shook his head. "But I

heard a crazy story a few days ago, though. About a man having some kind of an empire toward the southwest. Runs it like a king, they said. His riders all dress alike, like they was an army and—"

The Lone Wolf looked up at an empty whisky bottle that stood on a shelf near the door, and grinned. He rubbed a thumb-knuckle along the point of his chin.

"Guess you generally keep full ones there, don't you, old-timer?" He led Goldy out into the street, and was about to swing up to the saddle when he saw a man hustling toward him, waving a piece of paper in his hand.

"Hatfield—wait!" the man called. He came puffiing up, a small stout man with a wispy mustache. "Message just come for you."

Jim Hatfield read it. It was from Bill McDowell, and was strangely vague.

DROP THE SUGDEN CASE AND PROCEED AT ONCE TO ALPINE. URGENT. CONTACT SHERIFF RAY YOUNT FOR FURTHER DETAILS, AND COOPERATE FULLY. WILL SEND MORE MEN IF NEEDED. McDOWELL.

"Thanks," the Lone Wolf said, and crammed the message into his pocket.

Alpine was a long ride from Kelso Springs, not far from Cathedral mountain. He got into the saddle and rode along the street to the watering trough in the shade of a giant locust tree, and let the sorrel take the water it needed. A lot of miles had to be covered before the sun went down. As he slowly shaped a cigarette he glanced back at the stable and wondered if there really had been truth in the rumors that had drifted into the old hostler's ears.

He grinned at the significance of a certain line in the Ranger's boss's message, *Will send more men if needed.* Never had there been an outbreak of lawlessness he had failed to stomp out mostly by his own efforts. They were the terms McDowell had long since accepted. Jim Hatfield worked alone or not at all. He was the Lone Wolf. The trouble he was heading for had to be of no small proportion to give Bill McDowell pause.

There was no resentment in Hatfield as he put Kelso Springs well behind him, for he knew that McDowell was deeply concerned over his safety, and most likely had it in the back of his mind that a man's luck, even the Lone Wolf's, could not hold out forever . . .

The old and crumbling mission of San Gabriel was as old as the Staked Plains. It stood on a high eminence overlooking the town of San Rosa, and afforded a long vista of the land where Texas lifted to its greatest height. Rock-littered ridges, mesas, canyons, and grazing lands separated the mountain peaks, and the long valley widened into a sinuous oval, bounded on every side by a bluff line without a break.

The old well in the mission's plaza was drying fast, and the ancient bell was green and cracked with age. Only the huge cross seeemd to have withstood the weathering and erosion of centuries. Father Alfredo walked slowly out through the gate in the crumbling adobe wall, and looked down at the valley below, a sadness in his deep-sunken eyes. The man was older than he knew; his skin was like old parchment drawn tightly over the big bones of his face.

He had just come from the altar where he kept a candle burning for a man named Thomas Ryle, who had been a United States Marshal. Only a few days before he had given him the last rites of the church, and when he had returned to the mission, he had gotten down on his knees and asked some forgiveness for himself. It was he who had brought the marshal to San Rosa, and he felt indirectly responsible for his death.

Down in the town the lights were being lit, and the old padre dismally watched the movements of riders on the three roads that fed into the town. And when the distant pagan racket of San Rosa, steadily building, became too much for his discriminating ears, he walked back into the mission, his cassock flapping around his thin legs.

The laws were man-made, he told himself regretfully. They were not fashioned by God, and so they had not been his con-

cern. But when the proof of a man's guilt had been laid at his very feet, had it been his duty to ignore it and sit idly by like a neophyte counting his rosary? He had no trust in Saul Krebb, San Rosa's sheriff, and so he had journeyed to Alpine on his donkey, and had seen Ray Yount, a lawman whose integrity left no doubt in his mind.

The man's jurisdiction reached far short of the valley spread out between the Bullis Gap and Big Bend ranges, but it was within the man's province to make contact with a United States marshal at the county seat twelve miles from his office.

Tom Ryle had come to San Rosa, had asked a few questions and taken a ride through part of the valley. At midnight he had gone to his room at the hotel, and in the morning he was found dead in his bed, a bullet through his chest.

FATHER Alfredo poured himself a glass of wine, sipped it slowly, and thought of the days in the good past when the Ortegas owned the big ranch called the Rolling M. They grazed nearly twenty-thousand head of cattle on the grant that had been given to the old family by a Queen of Spain. One day a man had come to San Rosa, with two other men. He called himself Frank DeGoya.

These three rode out to the Ortega ranch, and DeGoya made an offer to buy the grant. Senor Ortega, of course, refused to sell, and DeGoya, without pressing the matter, rode away. It was not long after that misfortune fell upon the Ortegas. Fire swept their ranch buildings one gusty night and destroyed everything but the adobe ranchhouse. And then, for some unknown reason their cattle stampeded and nearly two thousand head were lost.

Out of the badlands came a gang of rustlers that slowly but surely decimated the Ortega herd. A vaquero was found dead. Then another. Fear drove Senor Ortega's other riders away, and then De Goya appeared in the valley once more and took the Ortega grant at his price. In less than twenty-four hours he had hired twenty-four men, and some of these had no sign of a rope callous on their hands.

"I'll be ready for the wide-loopers," DeGoya had said, and Father Alfredo had been in San Rosa that day and had heard him, and even then he knew that this man was evil and that he already looked beyond the boundaries of the Ortega grant.

DeGoya's influence and stature had grown along with the size of his herd, and he had retained Saul Krebb as sheriff of San Rosa and announced to the crowd that had witnessed the swearing in, "And if he can't uphold the law, we will organize vigilantes to do it for him!"

It was passing strange, the old padre thought at the time, that the wild bunch seemed to have completely vanished from the land. As he drained his glass, he lived over a wet and evil night again, when a dying man had fallen off his horse near the old well in the plaza. He knew that there had been but one source from which he had found the strength to lift the wounded man up and carry him into the mission. Johnny Blake had been his name, and he had been one of Frank DeGoya's riders. The beard on his pale face had been silky soft.

Johnny, he remembered with some bitterness, had cursed him. He believed in nothing, he had told Father Alfredo, and then when he realized that he was dying, a great fear had come into his eyes, and quickly, as if to rid himself of a great burden, he had told of the holdup and robbery of the paymaster's wagon on the way to the Pena Blanca mine.

And then Johnny Blake had died, and Father Alfredo suddenly knew more than he should have known. For days after he had walked the plaza, wondering as to the sanctity of this confession. He had asked for an answer many times, kneeling devoutly, and finally he was certain that he was not bound to secrecy, everything considered. Johnny Blake had never been baptized. He had held to no faith, and only a last minute fear of something that might be true had driven the words from him.

Father Alfredo finished his wine, nodded to himself. He was certain that he had done the right thing. He had put Johnny Blake's body on the back of his donkey and taken it down to San Rosa. The black cloth with the two-eye-holes cut into it he had buried behind the mission. And after Johnny Blake was buried, he had gone to Alpine to see Ray Yount. Beyond that, he had washed his hands of it.

CHAPTER III

Twisting, Turning Body

FAY QUARTERONE came into San Rosa an hour after dawn one morning, under a lowering sky, and between two of DeGoya's riders who had happened to meet him at the *Canon de Muerte*, a way out of the badlands. These two wore identical garb, dark trousers and boots, a gray shirt and flat-crowned black hats banded with braided rawhide. These men took him to the Camino Real, DeGoya's big saloon and gambling hall and sat him down.

"You've got a couple of hours to wait," one said, and called the barkeep over.

Quarterone shuffled his boots against the puncheon floor as he touched off a corn-husk cigarillo, and insolently studied the hard-bitten face of the man who had taken a chair across the table from him.

"I take it you're the great Tebo Mace," Quarterone said, with a streaky impatience. "To see DeGoya I have to see you first? Do I have to wear a fancy hat and a gray shirt?"

"You'll learn soon enough, Fay," Mace said, his steel-gray widely-spaced eyes measuring his man. There was that fever in them that never burned out of men of his fraternity, until they were quickly dead. He instinctively knew that the gunman facing him was absorbed in a kindred speculation. "I'm trying to place that fast gun you told us about on the way in, Fay. The one you claimed saved your skin."

"I'll tell you again, Tebo. I never saw a faster draw. I saw McFayden and Elser, and Burko. They wouldn't have had a chance against him."

Tebo Mace snorted his doubt. "Most likely he'll drift down this way, Fay. We'll see how salty he is."

"For my part, he can ride the other way," Quarterone said, and poured himself another drink. "Quite a territory here, Tebo. Too much for one man."

"Keep talking like that and you'll soon be dead, Fay." Mace was reaching for the whisky bottle when a stout man with a long black mustache appeared on the stairway.

"Mace," he called out. "The boss wants you."

The gunman scraped his chair back and got up quickly. "Hell, he's up early this morning," he said. "Must have something heavy on his mind. Wait here, Quarterone."

"See you, Tebo." The gunman grinned, and lifted his eyes to the ceiling. To himself he muttered, "They sure jump when the big man talks."

Frank DeGoya occupied the entire floor above the Camino Real. The furniture in his combined office and living quarters while in San Rosa was old world, massive and expensive. He was a tall man with crow-black hair and sideburns worn long. His piercing dark eyes seemed to peer over high cheekbones in a face as dark as the stain on the desk at which he sat. His black mustache was heavy but carefully trimmed. His suit was of rich brown cloth, his white shirt starched and pleated.

Only a man expert in the classification of nationalities might find himself puzzled in this man's presence, and sense a front as false as those of the buildings lining the street.

DeGoya nodded stiffly when Tebo Mace came in, his hat in his hand. He said, "I saw a man come in with you and Venter. Who is he?"

"Fay Quarterone," Mace said, and DeGoya's brows lifted. "I've heard the

name, Tebo. Put him on the payroll and give him his equipment. Eighty dollars a month." DeGoya leaned back in his chair and said, "Sit down, Tebo. The others will be here in a minute." He smiled blandly. "How about Sid Wahl?"

"Drunk when I left," Mace grinned. "That makes it one whole day. Sid always stretches a bender to three." He leaned forward, his face gone suddenly sober. "He was one of the best a few years ago, Frank. He gunned a lot of fast men down. A hell of a way for him to—"

"I can arrange for you to take his place," DeGoya said brittlely.

Mace fell back in his chair, sweat glistening around his mouth. "I'm not that sorry for him," he said, and forced a grin to his mouth.

The door opened slowly, and a burly, florrid-faced man came in. His stomach bulged slightly over his gunbelt, and there was a star pinned to his dirty shirt. DeGoya looked at the man he owned, body and soul with ill-concealed contempt.

"All right, Krebb," he said. "I'm going to make you look like something you never were before the day is over. A sheriff doing his job. You've been belly-sick ever since that marshal was buried. Afraid of facing the next one surely to come in. The people have been demanding that you find Ryle's killer. You will have him. Then the vigilantes will do the rest."

Krebb shook his head in bewilderment. Before thinking, he blurted out, "But we know who—"

Tebo Mace jumped to his feet, kicking his chair halfway to the wall. His hand slapped the handle of his gun.

DeGoya yelled, "Hold it Mace!" He whirled toward Krebb. "Oh you big-mouthed damned fool." He shoved the sheriff half off his feet with a thrust of his hand. "We know nothing you understand. One more slip like that and I'll bury you."

Krebb's face slowly drained of its fear. "What do you—want me to do, Frank?" He sleeved the cold sweat from his forehead.

"You be at the Rolling M at four this afternoon. Tebo will show you the rest. Now get out!"

DeGoya waited until the sound of the sheriff's departure faded completely. He stared at Tebo Mace. "They still talking about Johnny Blake?"

The gunman shook his head. "I told a convincing story, Frank. The kid couldn't wait to grow up. He wanted to prove he was a man, and called me. I had to shoot him, before witnesses."

Frank DeGoya smiled and took a thin cigar frm the box on his desk. "I'll see that you get an extra share of that mine payroll, Tebo. When the time comes. Another marshal or perhaps a ranger will move in here, and most likely he won't be wearing a star. Keep your ears and your eyes open." He reached into his pocket and took out three silver dollars. "On your way past Dona Maria's stop in and give her this."

Tebo said, baring his big teeth, "We need no other watchdog, Frank. That old woman has cats eyes, and can hear a whisper clear across the street. I think she can even read a man's mind." He started to leave the room and DeGoya suddenly called him back. "You're spending too much time there on certain nights, Tebo."

"Maybe," the gunman said defiantly. "The girl, Reva, doesn't seem to mind. How much of my life do you own, Frank?"

"All of it, Tebo!" DeGoya shouted with rage. "A girl like that can ruin a man. A lot of men. A man looks into her eyes and feels ten times as big as he really is. He'll boast of the salty things he has done and intends to do, and in time her kisses can burn the idea in him that he could be top man, Tebo! When a man gets too mixed up with a woman I have no further use for him. I no longer trust him, especially when the woman is as beautiful and desirable as that one!"

"Frank," Tebo said, fighting to keep his temper below the surface. "I've always wondered. Why do you shy away from anything in petticoats?"

Even as he whirled, the big Ranger drew a gun and fired at the man who kicked open the door

DEGOYA came up out of his chair and braced his leaning body against the desk with the heels of his hands. His lips moved but his sudden burst of anger tightened the words in his throat.

Finally he said, "It's none of your damned business, Mace," and let his breath gush out.

"Like I said, Frank, I'm my own man when I want to be. Remember you'll have to find a faster gun to get rid of me." Tebo Mace turned on his heels and walked out, slamming the door behind him.

DeGoya stared at the closed door. He took a half-burned cigar from an ashtray and crumpled it in a big fist, then slammed it to the rich carpeting. "I'll find him, Tebo," he ground out. "I'll find that man!"

Fay Quarterone got up from the table when Mace came down the stairs. "You look riled, Tebo," he said.

"Hit leather, Fay. You're hired," Tebo snapped. "I'll see you at the Rolling M."

Toward midafternoon, Sid Wahl got out of his bunk at DeGoya's ranch and leaned against a stanchion, trying to keep from retching. His thin face was ashy under its tan, and the brine trickling down his forehead was icy cold. He walked between the rows of bunks, steadying himself with his hands, and reaching the door he leaned heavily against the jamb and looked out across the yard. His whisky-sodden mind cleared a little as the drizzly rain struck against his face, and he dimly remembered a man somewhere on the back trail who had been given more of his share of the sidewalk when he cruised a town. He was a young and clear-eyed man with hands that drew a gun with amazing speed. They called him a top gun up in Kansas.

Wahl's vision became blurred and he angrily shook the mist away from his eyes. He saw the man again, older now, and very scared. Age had slowed his reflexes and thrown sand in his eyes. A kind of sob tore loose from his throat.

He had to run from town to town until certain men forgot his name. A drifter until he was close to forty, dulling old memories with whisky when they returned to haunt him.

He heard the slow run of horses out there in the drizzle, and soon he saw the shapes of four riders coming into the yard. They seemd to undulate as if immersed in water. He cursed, dug at his red-rimmed eyes with the knuckles of his hands, then staggered back from the doorway. He fell into a chair near the big bunkhouse table and reached for a bottle. Finding it empty, he smashed it against the wall.

Tebo Mace came in first, a bottle of whisky under his arm. Fay Quarterone and two flint-eyed nondescripts followed behind him.

Mace banged the bottle down on the table and said, "All right, Sid, drink this up!" He got his hands on Sid Wahl and shook him roughly, and soon got a grunt and a few thick words from the man.

Wahl was reaching for the bottle when Tebo Mace showed it out of his reach. He placed a sheet of paper and the stub of a pencil in front of the drunken cowpuncher.

"Not yet, Sid," Mace said. "You sign an I.O.U. for this bottle."

Wahl lifted his head with difficulty. "Sign?" he asked stupidly. "Sign what?"

"Dammit!" Mace said, and forced the stub of a pencil into Wahl's hand. "You think I'm made of money? Sign this, Sid, and the whole bottle is yours."

"All—all right, Tebo," Wahl muttered. He drew his sleeve across his eyes, shook his head, then stared down at the piece of paper. Then he lowered his head and laboriously scrawled his name at the place designated by Mace's index finger.

Mace quickly snatched the paper off the table, folded it quickly, and shoved it into his pocket. "Come on," he snapped at the others. "I want to get the stink of this off me."

Sheriff Saul Krebb came out to the Rolling M an hour later, and found the bottle next to the half-stupefied Sid Wahl nearly empty. Krebb sighed dismally and said to a deputy, "You'll have to tie him to his saddle."

He picked up the whisky bottle and drew deep of the strong stuff left in it. He put it down and looked at Sid Wahl being dragged out of his chair and his whole body trembled. He picked up the bottle and drained it nearly empty, slammed it down, and walked out of the bunkhouse.

Sid Wahl never reached San Rosa. When Saul Krebb and his prisoner, and his two deputies crossed the gravelled shoals of the Little Wind River, a group of masked riders spilled out of the timber A carbine backed up the muffled voice of the lead man. "We'll take him now, Krebb, and don't give us trouble."

The sheriff shouted uselessly, "You're bucking the law, Mister. Don't be crazy!" Suddenly he felt sick and made a grab for the saddle-horn.

"Drop the reins of that bronc, Sheriff!"

Krebb obeyed. Then he sat his horse alongside his silent deputies and watched the riders take Sid Wahl away. Slack-jawed, he stared at the darkening woods across the river where the sound of hoofs were dampened by the mat of pine needles from the trees. A terrible emptiness was in him.

A deputy said, "Come on, Saul. Isn't this what you wanted?"

The vigilantes hanged Sid Wahl not too far outside San Rosa, and left his body twisting and turning in the wind.

CHAPTER IV

The Confession

JIM HATFIELD came into Alpine late that day, only a few minutes ahead of three of DeGoya's men, his sharp eyes encompassing the main street with a single comprehensive glance. There was a small frame building cramped between the ornate false-fronted Blue Star Saloon and the mercantile. A

sign over the door said: SHERIFF'S OFFICE. Ray Yount was tipped back in his chair against the clapboards, watching the ranger ride up, knowing he had never seen nor would see again such a combination of man and beast.

He let his breath trail out when the rider dismounted at the tie-rail in front of the Blue Star. The man looked even taller out of the saddle, and as he came under the board marquee, instinctively lowering his head, Yount remembered the movements of a mountain lion he had once stalked high in the Carmen Range. The front legs of his chair came down with a loud bang, and he got to his feet.

"Sheriff Yount?" the Lone Wolf asked pleasantly.

The lawman held out his hand, grinning wide. "Right. And you're Ha—" Quickly he bit off the rest of the name when Hatfield's eyes flashed a warning. He said, keeping his voice down, "Sorry, let's go inside."

The ranger dropped into an armchair near Yount's old desk and built a smoke. Yount asked, "Long ride?"

"Yes and no," the Lone Wolf said. "We took it easy today. Thirty miles, maybe."

Yount saw no sign of weariness in this man they called the Lone Wolf, just a film of dust over his ordinary cowpuncher's clothes. When the first signs of impatience flickered in the man's eyes he hastily filled Jim Hatfield in regarding the happenings of the last few months. This finished, he reverted back to Frank DeGoya's beginning in the valley.

"The picture seems plain," Hatfield said. "I've seen it before. DeGoya owns both the law and the vigilantes. He's getting a monopoly on gunfighters, too, it seems. The formula is as old as the Bible, Yount. Any idea who shot the marshal?"

Yount shook his head. Casually he opened a desk drawer and took out a marshal's badge. "Father Alfredo brought it to me just after Ryle's funeral."

The Lone Wolf idly turned the badge of authority over and over in his hand. He smiled faintly at Yount, the corners of his mouth curving up. He dropped the badge into the pocket of his shirt.

"I figure, Sheriff, that the only way a man can find out anything is go where it is happening." He was getting up from the chair when Yount picked a newspaper from his desk.

"I was reading this awhile ago. It said nothing came out of your investigation up at Kelso Springs. Seems like Sugden—"

The Lone Wolf snatched up the newspaper. The story was short and to the point. The writer had gone into no great detail. The skeleton was found and examined, then buried again. That was all. He tossed the paper aside and shrugged.

"None of my business, of course," Yount said, and spun away from his desk when a commotion abruptly boiled up outside.

The Lone Wolf heard a man's high-pitched curse and the shrill nicker of a horse. He could identify that sound in the midst of a thousand milling horses, and he ran past Yount and out to the street. As his boots thumped the walk he saw a man lash his sorrel across the face, using his hat for a quirt.

"Damn you!" the man raged. "I'll teach you to throw your behind against me!" Goldy screamed and strained at the reins knotted over the long, heavy pole.

Jim Hatfield reached the man in less than half a dozen strides, shouldered a tough hand wearing bull-hide chaps out of the way, got his man by the scruff of the neck and spun him half around. He smashed him straight between the eyes with a rock-like fist and drove him out into the dust of the street where he fell heavily and rolled over and over.

"Why, damn your eyes!" a threatening voice roared, and the Lone Wolf, a Peacemaker filling his right hand, was around and facing the man in the bull-hides. Afterward, Yount swore he had never seen Hatfield draw. His gun only half-cleared, the tough one stared fearfully at the Lone Wolf, his lower jaw pulled down.

"Why wait, friend?" Hatfield mocked. "Or is your favorite target a man's backbone?" He suddenly hurled himself for-

ward, and knocked the man down with a quick movement of a powerful shoulder.

Yount yelled, "Look out!" and Hatfield twisted his body around and fired even as the man in the street came to his feet, his gun clearing its holster. The Colt spun away from the gunman's hand and he screamed as the Ranger's bullet plowed through his shoulder. He staggered backward, then fell heavily, sending up a billow of dust.

There was a third man here. He stood near his horse, watching. Tebo Mace thought, a coldness streaking across his stomach, *Quarterone was wrong. He didn't tell me how fast this jigger really was.* He walked over to Hatfield who was passing a hand over the sorrel's sleek nose. "You've started something, friend. I hope you can finish it. That man you knocked over is Ned Blue."

The Lone Wolf turned slowly and gave Tebo Mace a cold and expressionless stare. "Never heard of the man," he said, although he had on more than one occasion—and none of it good.

"You'll hear from his friends," Mace said, and went back to the walk. "Yount," he called to the sheriff, "I've got some important news for you."

Jim Hatfield watched two men help the wounded tough in the street to his feet. Blood soaked the man's gray shirt. The hat that still lay in the dust had a braided rawhide band, a perfect match to the one worn by the gunfighter who had just spoken to Ray Yount. Ned Blue, laid a baleful glance against the Lone Wolf and called out, "You'll need to be a hell of a lot quicker next time, stranger!"

"I'll try to be," the Ranger said, and turned and went into Yount's office.

Yount said, "Smith, this is Tebo Mace, DeGoya's ramrod."

Hatfield nodded stiffly. Mace was in Yount's swivel-chair, his feet up on the desk, and his spurs, new and shiny, raked into the wood.

"I just come to tell you Yount," the gunman said, "what my boss said to tell you. That we can handle our own business over in the valley. Krebb got the man who killed the marshal. It was Sid Wahl. Come on over to San Rosa and we'll show his confession, with his signature on it. And Sid's body after they cut him down."

The Lone Wolf saw Yount's face pale. A muscle near the man's mouth jumped. The sheriff opened his mouth to speak, then abruptly changed his mind.

"Thought it would be a surprise, Sheriff," Tebo Mace said, a smug grin bisecting his stubbled face. He swung his feet off the desk. "Figure you can't have much to do here, Yount, or you wouldn't be sticking your long nose in San Rosa's business." He got up and threw Jim Hatfield a wary and curious glance. "If you happen to be the new marshal, Smith, you can ride back to where you come from. Smith, now that's an old name, ain't it?"

"A matter of opinion," Hatfield replied softly.

TEBO MACE left the sheriff's office, and when the Lone Wolf heard the quick departure of DeGoya's men a few moments later, he gave Yount a puzzled and questioning glance. "The news seemed to hit you hard, Ray. If they've found the killer, that's it—the job's done."

Yount dropped into his chair and stared bleakly up at Hatfield. He swallowed hard, then said, "Tom Ryle was killed on a Wednesday night, Jim. The same night I locked Sid Wahl up for being drunk and disorderly, and I did not let him out until late the next morning. They've framed this. They've murdered an innocent man."

The planes of Hatfield's trail-darkened face became as hard as iron. Into his eyes crept the coldness and the consistency of deep green ice. He pushed the words out by a deep gust of breath. "That changes things, Yount. How far is San Rosa?"

"Jim," Yount wisely suggested, "rest yourself and that sorrel tonight. It's a deadly ride to that town after what happened here awhile ago, even in the daylight. Around noon tomorrow, San Rosa will be mostly empty."

"Sound reasoning," the Lone Wolf dryly admitted, remembering names on certain graves spread all over Texas. All had

worn the star-in-circle badge, and had never heard the shots that had come out of the dark. "I am vulnerable in certain spots, Ray."

His face deadly sombre, he went out to the walk and looked toward the saloon. Only his sorrel stud stood at the rail, and he strode over to the horse and shook her loose.

Ray Yount came out of his office and watched the Lone Wolf lead the sorrel down the street to the stable. He felt big-seemed to pull him out of his chair as if they had been a pair of strong hands.

He had never seen this measure of a man before, and groped for a reason for being observed with such impersonal intensity and plain contempt. He heard his name roll off the man's lips as if it tasted sour.

"You're Sheriff Saul Krebb?"

Saul Krebb felt as if his soul was lain bare. He tried to be coldly uncivil but a growing fear ran through him and

A TALL TEXAS TALE

PUTTERING AROUND

SOMEWHAT bored, a Texan at an Eastern resort decided to take up golf. The golf pro there, aware it was the Texan's first game, decided to go along with him. When the novice took out his putter to tee off, the pro told him, "You'd better use a driver."

"Son, in Texas we do as we please," the Texan declared, and swung away with his putter. The pro was startled to see the ball sail through the sky and come to rest within only two feet of the hole.

Addressing the ball again, the Texan this time selected a driver for the short putt. "I'd use a putter if I were you," the pro advised.

"Son, you don't have to tell a Texan what to do," the novice drawled. He swung at the ball, missed it completely, but the force of his effort created a breeze that sent the ball trickling into the cup.

The Texan turned to the pro now and said, "I guess we can all do with a mite of advice now and then. What club do you use to get the ball out of that there little hole?"

—Harold Helfer

ger for having met this man, and he thanked his lucky stars that he played this game on Jim Hatfield's side, and not DeGoya's. He went back into his office, sat down and angrily scrubbed the spur marks off the surface of his desk with the heels of his hands.

An hour before noon of the next day, Saul Krebb, dozing, suddenly sensed a presence out on the walk in front of the San Rosa lockup. His pouched eyes popped open and fell upon the shadow that stretched from the door sill and ended near the opposite wall. His gaze slowly lifted to the broad-shouldered man who made it. Under the brim of the flat-crowned hat, a pair of smoky-green eyes knotted the muscles of his throat. *God, but he needed a drink now.*

He nodded and said, "Yes, I'm Krebb."

Jim Hatfield crossed the room and dropped into a chair near the lawman's desk. Krebb involuntarily brushed his unkempt hair back, and hastily tucked the slack of his shirtfront inside his belt.

Hatfield smiled only with his mouth, took a marshal's badge from his pocket and gave Krebb a quick look at it. "I heard about this man named Sid Wahl, Sheriff. I'd like to take a look at his written confession."

"All legal, Marshal," Krebb hastened to explain, and got up and went to an old iron safe that was placed under a littered

table in one corner of the office. "There were witnesses to the signing."

"Of a kind, I imagine," the Lone Wolf said brittlely, and watched Krebb's fat hand fumble with the combination of the safe. The man's fingers were damp with sweat. They shook.

Finally Krebb swung the door of the strong-box open, reached inside and took out a folded sheet of paper just as Frank DeGoya and Tebo Mace walked in from the street.

DeGoya's arrogance brushed off on Saul Krebb, and the sheriff's face assumed its usual ruddiness when he faced Hatfield. His eyes drew on the defiance that crept back into him.

"That's the man, Frank," Tebo Mace said. "He calls himself Smith."

The Lone Wolf ignored the insolent indirect introduction and snatched the paper from Krebb's hand. He carried it to the desk and spread it open, still ignoring DeGoya. The confession read:

> I killed the marshal, Tom Ryle. I hated marshals. One killed my best friend. I make this statement of my own free will, and nobody forced me, so help me God.
>
> Sid Wahl.

Jim Hatfield straightened, turned slowly, and made his first appraisal of Frank DeGoya, and instantly saw the man's arrogance showing through his mockery of a smile. Here was a symbol of confident strength and ruthlessness that disdained the psychological effect of a pair of sixguns. DeGoya had that power to convey a threat without a gesture or a single word. The Lone Wolf had learned long ago never to underestimate an enemy or overestimate a friend.

"Welcome to San Rosa, Smith!" DeGoya said. "If there's anything we can do to help you, don't wait to yell out."

The Lone Wolf studied the confession again, then threw a biting glance at Saul Krebb. "The writing is different than Wahl's signature. Whose is it, Sheriff?"

"I wrote it. Sid never had much schooling. About all he could do was sign his name." Krebb, the oil shine of sweat spreading over the unhealthy flesh of his face, looked toward DeGoya for the courage he needed here.

"That's it, Marshal," DeGoya said. "That's all dead right. Krebb tried to get Sid Wahl to the jail but the vigilantes jumped him. The killing of a United States marshal spooked them to the limit."

The Lone Wolf crumpled Wahl's confession into a ball and flung it against Saul Krebb's chest. Storm was in his eyes when he shifted his gaze to DeGoya.

"You're both liars! Sid Wahl was locked up, dead drunk, in Yount's jail in Alpine all that night!"

Krebb's sickly reaction put a revlusion in Hatfield. The sheriff's toadish eyes groped for DeGoya, a pleading expression between their widening lids. "That couldn't be, Frank! Nobody told m—"

DeGoya sent Krebb back against the wall with the pressure of his eyes. "That's only Ray Yount's word!" He turned toward Hatfield, the muscles of his jaws lumped over their bones. "No man has ever called me a liar, Smith, and died without regretting it. I offered you full cooperation. Now, you go it alone!"

"A method I prefer, DeGoya," the Lone Wolf said, and kept the figure of Tebo Mace, idly leaning against the jamb of the door, within the line of his vision. "I can't say as much for you," he said, and strode out of the office, brushing a holster against the handle of Mace's tied-down gun as he passed the gunman.

Tebo Mace stepped inside when Hatfield was out in the middle of the street. There was a puzzled expression in his hard eyes. "Frank, why the hell don't he wear a badge?"

CHAPTER V

A Silver Spur Rowel

THE Ranger tasted fear, along with the dust that the wind whipped up from the wide street. Fear, he knew, had been a weapon that had built empires. There had to be some good and honest people in San Rosa, but he knew that fear sealed their lips and tied their hands. He looked toward the cross of Father Alfredo's mission limned against the sky, an incongruous symbol in this gunfighter's paradise, and he guessed that the path to it was not worn very smooth.

He reached the opposite walk and went into a small store where a man and a woman were piling bolts of cloth on a scarred counter. The man was small, a timidness in his blue eyes and around his heavily mustached mouth. The woman had solidness enough for both the man and herself. She gave Hatfield a ready smile.

"I need a couple pair of woolen socks," the Lone Wolf said, and leaned against the counter.

"I can oblige you," the woman said. "And I can give you advice at the same time, Marshal. You don't look like a man like mine, who scares easy, but neither did the other marshal. Don't stay in San Rosa."

"Martha!"

"Shut up, Chet," the woman said. "I'm sick to my soul by what goes on here. There's a man hanging from a tree-limb in full sight of this town. Real men I used to know have turned into rabbits, and they run for cover when the sun goes down. We're selling out, Marshal, and going back to Illinois where a person can lie safe in bed." She picked up a ball of twine, then slammed it down. "Where in Heaven's name is real law? Where are the rangers?"

The little man said testily, "Courage is no good without a gun and a fast draw to back it up. A bullet goes through him the same as it does a coward, Marshal."

Jim Hatfield smiled thinly, and nodded. He paid for his purchase and left the small mercantile, his face a mask of grim decision. He walked to the Hotel Delta, a box-like structure two doors from the Camino Real, and found a man straightening four chairs against the wall in the lobby. He was a loose-jointed man approaching middle-age, with old pock marks on his face.

"Rooms ain't emptied yet," he said with studied insolence, and walked toward a small cubicle in the corner of the room.

Hatfield strode after him, grabbed him by the galluses and spun him around. "You're not talking to a saddle bum, Mister. Get me the key to room forty-one or I'll get it myself. And I've got Krebb's brand of law in my pocket."

The hotel clerk cringed against the wall, as if the Lone Wolfe's blazing greenish eyes pinned him there. His mouth worked convulsively, and finally he managed to get a few words through his thick lips. "Sure, number forty-one. I'll get the key, Marshal."

A few minutes later, walking up the dirty, worn carpeting of the stairs, Hatfield flung back at the still frightened clerk, "Never mind running for Tebo Mace or other gunfighters, friend. They know I'm in town."

He reached the narrow corridor on the second floor and began checking the numbers painted on the shabby doors. He came to the one marked 41, unlocked it, and stepped inside. This was the room where Tom Ryle had been murdered in his bed. He crossed the room and looked out of the one window offering a view of a trash-littered back alley. Just below him was the slanting roof of a shed that had been built against the back of the hotel, and he nodded to himself.

A man could get a good foot-hold on the sun-baked shingles, he mused. Old wooden boxes could have been piled up to allow the same man to reach the roof. The sun struck little shards of light from something just below the window sill. A piece of glass wedged between the shingles, the Lone Wolf guessed.

He swung over the sill and dug his high-heels into the weathered shingles. He hunkered down, casually assuming the attitude of a man having no thought of what his next move might be. He was being watched closely, he was certain, although there was no sign of life in the alley or near the old warehouse at the back of San Rosa.

He waited. He built a cigarette with deliberate slowness. Then he let a hand drop between his knees, and groped with his fingers until they touched a sharp object with a ragged edge. He pried the thing loose with some difficulty, then palmed it, but did not immediately lift his hand.

He killed another two or three minutes, then lifted himself to his full height, and looked out at the bluff-line far beyond the town. He made a weary gesture with his hands, then stepped back through the window and into the room. Out of line with the window he unclenched his right fist and looked at the object that had broken the calloused skin on the beefy part of his thumb. It was a solid silver spur rowel, fashioned into the shape of a sunflower. He dropped it into his pocket and left the room.

Saul Krebb was in the lobby of the Delta when Hatfield came down the stairs. He had his hat off and held against his fat stomach, and was twisting it with his hands.

"What did you expect to find up there, Smith?" he asked guardedly.

"You trailing me, Krebb?"

"The boss said to watch out for you. To help you anyway I could. He just went off the handle awhile ago," Krebb said, his eyes too small for the guile they thought they were hiding.

"You can help a lot, Sheriff," the Lone Wolf said coldly. "Keep out of my way! How have you helped the honest people in this town? What did you do for Sid Wahl?" He angrily fired the key to Room 41 at the hotel clerk who caught it against his chest. "You murdered him as sure as he didn't kill Tom Ryle, Krebb!"

He walked out of the lobby, and Krebb said chokingly, "Damn him!" and banged a fist against the arm of his chair.

The clerk said in an empty voice, "A lot of men have come through here, Saul. Tough and big and fast, but I've never seen one like this jigger before. I looked into the eyes of a lynx once down in Sonora, and his eyes are as green and as sharp, and more dangerous. He walks like a big cat, Saul, and the way he wears those Peacemakers! They're polished only by the oil from his hands."

"Shut up, damn you! Keep your big mouth closed!" Saul Krebb got up from his chair and mopped the clamminess from his face with a dirty bandanna. Like a man walking in his sleep, he reached the street, humbled by his own memories as well as Jim Hatfield's tongue-lashing.

It had been a peaceable town before DeGoya had come. His talents had been sufficient to control the wildness of the ordinary cowpunchers who came to San Rosa for a night of howling. He still wore the star, but it really did not belong to him. Perhaps if his wife had not died and taken most of his good substance with her, he wouldn't have sold his pride and his very soul.

Krebb went into the Camino Real to get the only thing that could make him forget.

The barkeep slid a glass toward him, and reached behind him for a bottle. "Starting early today, Sheriff?" he said, the inflection in his voice unmistakable.

"None of your damned business," Krebb said, and poured his glass to the brim. Then he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror behind the long bar, and slammed the glass down, spattering the barkeep's clean white shirt. He stumbled out to the walk, no longer feeling any hate for the tall, broad-shouldered man who had ridden into San Rosa on the sorrel horse.

His emotion now was one of deepest envy, and it was mixed with bitter regret and the realization that he had murdered Sid Wahl as surely as if he had plunged a knife through the old gunman's heart. Krebb unconsciously wiped his sweaty hands over the front of his dirty gray

shirt as he made his way to the San Rosa sheriff's office.

LATE that afternoon, Father Alfredo came down from the mission to offer simple rites at an open grave in boothill. Jim Hatfield sat his sorrel at the edge of the graveyard until the burial party picked up their shovels and walked away. Then he rode over to where the old padre's donkey was tied. The little animal brayed and showed its teeth to Goldy, and the sorrel nickered and nearly nudged the smaller beast of burden off his feet with a flick of its shoulder.

Father Alfredo came up, holding the rope that had been cut loose from Sid Wahl. He suddenly held it up in front of his old eyes, then let it drop as if it were something unclean. He looked at Jim Hatfield, his old face split by a kindly and rueful smile. This man could be the one whose coming he had prayed for. True, this man wore two big pistols, but hadn't the boy, David, carried a weapon that had slain Goliath?

Once or twice he had heard that such a man as this one really existed, and there were stories about him his old mind could no longer recall. And this beautiful sorrel horse the man rode. Never had he seen such a splendid animal. Truly, it was less of a beast than most of the men in this sorely-troubled valley.

"*Buenos noches, Padre,*" Jim Hatfield said. "Are you certain he was worth the trouble?"

"He was a man, Senor." Father Alfredo said. "I only prayed for the salvation of his soul. I would be pleased to have you as a guest at Mission San Gabriel, amigo."

"*Gracias,* Padre. I hope I can visit you before many days. After certain work I have to do is done."

"God be with you, Senor," the padre said, and mounted his donkey. He began his ride up the long grade to the mission, and the Lone Wolf watched him for awhile, then rode the sorrel into San Rosa and turned it loose at the stable.

"Rub him down," he said to the hostler. "Feed him in about an hour."

He crossed the street to the Delta hotel and there he asked the clerk, no longer insolent, for a room.

"There ain't a single one left, Marshal," the man said. "We're all full up, unless somebody checks out or loses an argument in the Camino Real."

The Lone Wolf's grin was as bleak as a raw hillside. "I'll take your word for it," he said. "But you lie through your rotten teeth and you know it."

"Wait," the clerk said, as Jim Hatfield turned to leave. "There may be a room at Dona Maria's. It's the two-story adobe right outside town, near the corduroy bridge. Her beds, they say, are better than ours, Smith."

"I'll look into it," Hatfield said, and went out into the street that was beginning to fill with traffic.

Over at DeGoya's Camino Real, the tinny piano was being played, and percentage girls moved along the walks to the big saloon to make certain the profits there would be big. This was the time of day when the timid people of San Rosa moved indoors and drew their shades down.

A dozen riders hit the wide mouth of the street, the dust boiling up around them, and nearly trampled a small buckboard driven by a woman. The rig, its span of horses squealing with fright, piled up against a high walk's edge and threw a wheel.

One of the riders, leading the pack, threw a glance over his shoulder and roared, "Tell the wheelwright I'll want my cut, old woman!" It was Tebo Mace.

Jim Hatfield spread his legs wide, braced himself in the dried mud and let the riders come on. Mace swung his face to the front and saw Hatfield not twenty feet away from his hard-running claybank. Surprise opened his mouth for a brief moment, and then it closed tight and formed a wicked grin.

The Lone Wolf drew a sixgun and laid a shot close to the claybank's flying front feet, and the horse screamed and reared up, spun half around and threw its rider

clear. Tebo yelled with panic as the rest of the Rolling M crew fought to keep their spooked broncs from beating him into the ground.

"That was for the woman, Tebo!" Jim Hatfield shouted, when the gunfighter scrambled to his feet. He dropped a Peacemaker back into its holster. "Let it be now as well as later," he challenged. "Go ahead—draw!"

Tebo Mace knew the town was watching. He carried DeGoya's prestige in his sixguns, and the urge to draw tore at the muscles of his face and burned in his wicked eyes. Something he had never felt before stayed his hand, a deep doubt and a cold fear that ran along his bones.

His body suddenly became loose. "Some other time, Smith. It's murder, they say, if you kill a man wearing a law badge. That's your protection, Mister, for awhile."

The Lone Wolf stared down the rest of DeGoya's crew, then moved toward the walk. He warily watched Tebo Mace and his riders angle toward the Camino Real, then hurried toward the frightened woman who sat in a chair in front of the mercantile. There was an ugly gash on her right arm, and her face was pale and frightened. People stood around, uncertain, and Jim Hatfield got hold of a man and yanked him against him.

"Get some clean cloth and some rubbing alcohol!" he said angrily. "You want her to bleed to death?"

The woman looked up at the Lone Wolf, then slowly shook her head from side to side. "A decent man in San Rosa?" she asked unbelievingly. Saul Krebb, walking past, on an urgent errand for Frank DeGoya, heard her say it and clamped his jaws tight. A few moments ago, in the Camino Real, he had poured himself a full glass of whisky, but this time he had not thrown it away.

When the injured woman had been looked after, Jim Hatfield cruised the town. He walked the length of the wide main street and back again, then leaned against the building housing the barber shop and watched the pattern of San Rosa, and studied the subtle actions of certain men.

Deep dark having set in, Saul Krebb emerged from a narrow areaway half way up the street, and crossed to his office. He seemed to shuffle along, his head bent, as if studying every step he took. The noise in the Camino Real had reached its zenith, a boiling racket that strummed a man's nerves and carried far out over the flats.

Tebo Mace came out of the saloon, stopped to converse with two Rolling M punchers who were on the way in. Then, alone, Mace built a smoke, got it burning, and stepped off the walk and headed for the hitch-rail.

The Lone Wolf watched the gunhawk ride out of town and take the stage road that wound up to a high ridge northeast of San Rosa. He glanced toward the Delta and saw that only two windows of the hotel were alight, and reflectively rubbed a thumb-knuckle along the line of his jaw. A smile played around his mouth.

He waited another half hour before he paid the hotel clerk another visit. When he entered the lobby, the man shook his head impatiently. "No luck," Marshal," he said. "Better try Dona Maria's before some men in town finish their drinking."

CHAPTER VI

The Trap

HATFIELD turned without a word and walked out, not forgetting this was Frank DeGoya's town, and that his every action was observed, and also knowing that somebody was much too solicitous about his having a bed for the night, but not in the Delta. He headed for the outskirts, and passing the mouth of a dark alley, the strength of a man's covert scrutiny pulled his eyes that way.

The shape of a man, his face mostly in shadow, had his shoulders pin-pointed against a corner of the building. The tip of a burning cigarette suddenly glowed

bright as he pulled at it, revealing certain sharp angles of his thin face. Hatfield, for a moment, thought he had seen this man before, but he shrugged the idea aside and kept to his slow and steady stride. He indulged in a small laugh. He had seen so many slopers the past few years that they were all beginning to look alike.

At the end of the street he could see the house of Dona Maria, a drab block of dried mud, toothed near the roof with cedar poles. The Lone Wolf caught himself thinking of a box-trap he had built as a kid to catch unwary rabbits as he kept walking. Lamplight yellowed the curtains of two of the adobe's windows.

Hatfield rapped on the heavy door, and in a few moments it swung slowly inward, and a dark-skinned fat woman's little eyes peered up at him. Her graying jet-black hair was pulled back from her moon-face. "Well, Senor?" she inquired irritably.

"I was told you had rooms to let here," the Lone Wolf said, and heard a stirring somewhere inside the house.

"None tonight, Senor," Dona Maria said, and started to close the door. "Perhaps," she said, and opened it wide again. "Come in. Perhaps I have a bed for you."

He stepped into a small room that smelled of all the people that had ever stopped there, and the meals they had eaten. The furniture was old, what was left of it. A table stood in the middle of the bare dirt floor, covered with a dirty, cracked sheet of oil-cloth. A guttering oil-lamp stood in the center of it. Flies fed on a morsel of food that had been left on the table. They buzzed against the ceiling.

Dona Maria called out: "Reva! Come here, *muy pronto!*" She turned her little beady eyes toward Hatfield. "My niece, si. She can sleep in my room. You take hers, Senor."

The Lone Wolf midly protesteed, reasonably sure it had been planned this way. And then the girl came out of an adjoining room, bringing a heady musky scent with her. Her eyes were a deep brown, and her dark hair dropped down over her shoulders in a thick silky mass. Her full lips were parted from snowy-white teeth, and the ear-rings she wore glinted in the lamplight. She was a tall girl and well proportioned, her dark skirt tight around her hips and thighs.

The Ranger nodded politely, vaguely stirred by the girl's charms. "Senorita, it is good of you to give up your room. *Gracias.*"

"It is nothing, Senor," Reva said, and softly laughed. "Only my aunt she snores so loud, si."

"You need the feel of my hand again!" Dona Maria said angrily. "But go, show him the room, Reva. And no eyes at the handsome senor, you hear?"

Jim Hatfield followed the girl into a small bedroom. It was plainly furnished with a double bed, a dresser and a chair. There was a Mexican rug on the floor, and a cruifix on the wall just above the bed. The Lone Wolf regarded this, and wondered as to the depth of the girl's devotion.

He heard the door close and turned. The girl was still there, smiling at him through lowered lids. He was instantly alert when Reva crossed the room and pulled the window shade down. Was that a small sound outside the house? The girl came toward him, eyes disturbingly inviting. From the distance came the muted racket from the Camino Real.

He let Reva slide her arms up and around his shoulders, and then anticipating the scream that came from her throat, he flung her away from him and against a wall. As he whirled toward the door of the room, he drew a sixgun and fired a shot at the man who kicked it open. His bullet hit Tebo Mace high on the leg close to the gunhawk's tied-down holster and sent him crashing backwards into the fat shape of Dona Maria.

Jim Hatfield swung around and yelled at the wide-eyed Reva, "Get out there with them, you little devil! I don't like a knife in my back."

The girl ran past the Lone Wolf and dropped down beside the cursing Tebo Mace. Dona Maria, her face an inscru-

table mask, stood with her back against the heavy, front door. She spat at Jim Hatfield.

"You have the instinct of the devil!" she said.

"Walking into hell it comes in handy, old woman," the Lone Wolf said. "An old, old game, Dona Maria. Tebo protecting his sweetheart's honor against a lawman. It would make a killing justified in any court of law."

Mace, his face gray with pain, struggled to his feet with the help of the girl, Reva. He dug the fingers of his gunhand into the wound in his leg.

"Hell, Smith," he blurted out, "Why didn't you kill me! I'm as good as dead hopping around on one leg."

"It isn't time for you to die yet, Tebo!" Hatfield mocked. "Haven't you heard a man doesn't go before that time? It's in my mind you'll be more miserable alive." He reached out and pushed the fat woman toward the kitchen. "Heat up some water, and tear up some cloth, or would it help a certain curly wolf if this gunhawk bled to death? You most likely are paid well, but not for your rooms."

He jumped quickly toward Reva who was jerking the sixgun from Mace's holster. He hit her with his shoulder, and his momentum sent both himself and the screaming girl hard against the door. As she squirmed loose, he caught her by the shoulders and looked close at the bright earrings she wore.

"Little sunflowers, Tebo!" Hatfield said. "They just match a pair of spurs a man wore who climbed a shed roof and shot an unarmed and sleeping man in his bed. I happen to have one of the spurs he left there, Tebo! And Reva, I figure, is your sweetheart and—"

Out in the kitchen a pan made a loud clatter against a stone floor, and Jim Hatfield grinned bleakly at the fearful look on Tebo Mace's face. The gunman forced the glint of guilt out of his eyes and laughed. "You've got to prove it, you know. Go to the sheriff, Smith. Tell Saul Krebb what you think you learned."

"It is a lie!" Reva fairly screeched, but Hatfield saw her stare at Tebo as if he were already dead. The gunman dropped heavily into a chair near the table, suffering from something more than deep physical pain.

"It all fits, Mace!" the Lone Wolf persisted. "Ryle was a marshal and he had to die. I come to San Rosa, carrying a badge, and you tried to kill me tonight."

Tebo Mace filled his tortured eyes with hate and swung them toward the Lone Wolf. "You won't live the week out, Smith!" he said. "I'll bet my last dollar on it."

"It's a bet, Tebo," Hatfield said, moving toward the door. "I doubt if I'll ever collect my winnings, though." He bowed mockingly to the women. "*Gracias,* Senora and Senorita," he said, and tipped his hat. "Certain men, it seems, will see a ghost walk back into San Rosa."

IN HIS rooms over the Camino Real, Frank DeGoya stood at the window, a cold cigar held fast between his teeth. He had met many men who had given him trouble and rough opposition in the past and had overcome them, but not until he had met the man riding the golden sorrel had his life and fortune felt insecure.

Somewhere he had heard that most men of his kind, coldly ruthless and ambitious, had waited too long before deciding they had riches enough, and had been destroyed. But like all the others of his kind, Frank DeGoya relished power beyond anything else. He gloried in watching his hired men squirm at one word from him, and it was food to his cruel nature to see them jump to do his bidding.

The hate for this mysterious lawman who gave him the disturbing feeling of vulnerability had become a malignancy inside him that would never heal until the man was dead. Not until he was shot down would he cease to feel that his great power and possessions had become as intangible as a poker pot still building up in the center of one of his gambling tables. He swung away from the window and looked at Saul Krebb who sat near his table, his eyes heavy with the whisky

he had drunk.

"Dammit!" he said. "It should be over by now."

Saul Krebb nodded, a growing rebellion against DeGoya hidden by his heavy eyelids. Fay Quarterone sat on the table's edge cutting his nails with the blade of a jacknife.

"It better be, DeGoya," Fay said in his throaty voice. "One lawman dead. Then another. Then a dozen will come. Maybe the Texas Rangers. Maybe a man named Hatf—" Quarterone seemed startled by

Fay Quarterone roughly shoved Krebb away from the window and looked out into the street. He saw the tall shape of the man who called himself Smith walking directly in the middle of the street, throwing a long shadow.

When Hatfield had disappeared into the semi-dark rectangle that was the door of the stable, Quarterone turned toward DeGoya and said, "It's him. I tell you it's the ranger, Jim Hatfield."

"You're crazy," Saul Krebb said, but fear was in his voice.

"But we're not sending any smoke signals, that's just my wife getting breakfast."

the sound of his own voice. He left the table and walked around, then stopped and looked into space. Krebb heard the sudden intake of the gunfighter's breath.

DeGoya laughed. "Hell, we're as nervous as women, Quarterone." He got his cigar smoking again and walked to the table to pour himself a drink. The strong stuff chased unease out of him and he went back to the window. Then Krebb and Quarterone saw him clutch at a brocade drape as if he was trying to save himself from falling. His curse brought them quickly across the room.

"Look," DeGoya said. "Mace bungled it, damn his eyes!"

DeGoya knew now why his mind had never been able to leave the rider of the sorrel horse alone from the minute he had first looked into a pair of eyes in Saul Krebb's office. He had suspected then, but refused to admit the truth.

Quarterone's voice droned in his ears. "He was in Kelso Springs when Earl Spain tried to gun me down. Later I heard Jim Hatfield had gone there to dig up a skeleton. One and the same man, and no mistake." Frank DeGoya made another trip to the bottle on the table and drank from it deep, disdaining the cut glass tumbler he always used. Jim Hatfield? The man owned nothing but the two guns he wore

and the horse he rode. He let his ego build and thought of the gunfighters backing him up and he no longer considered the inevitable.

A sudden and unexpected lull in the talk and shouting and laughter below tipped his head to the side. He hurried out of the room and leaned over the balcony and saw that the crowd in the Camino Real had split and were letting Tebo Mace through. Tebo came toward the stairway, dragging his right leg, his face twisted with pain, and the color of cigar ash. Mace cursed at those who were verbally curious as he stumbled toward the newel post of the stairs.

DeGoya yelled for all to hear, "Who did you tangle with, Tebo?"

Mace dragged himself up the stairs, and when a big door closed behind him, he said to DeGoya, "Hell, it was all made too plain, Frank. He was expecting it! It'll take more than one man to gun that salty devil down and keep him there."

DeGoya stared long at Tebo Mace, puzzlement burning behind the anger in his eyes. "Why didn't he kill you, Tebo?"

The gunman shook his head. But he kept his gaze averted. "Frank, I don't know. As little time as he had to draw, he placed the shot at me." Reaction and a growing terror wrung the sweat out of him. "I need a drink."

"The bottle is half full, Tebo," DeGoya said, too quietly. "Down it all if you like."

Mace greedily drank, the whisky dripping down either side of his mouth. He finally banged the empty bottle down, and fell heavily into a chair.

DeGoya said, "Call two of the crew up here, Krebb. Tell them to get Tebo out of here and onto his horse, and then to the ranch. A lot of use you are to me, Mace. What would you do with a crippled dog?"

"I'll give him a hand," Quarterone said, a wicked smile dancing in his eyes. The Rolling M was without a foreman.

Frank DeGoya walked out of the Camino Real nearly an hour later when most of the windows of San Rosa were dark. He cruised slowly up the street until he came to the two giant, thin-leafed cottonwoods that glistened with the night's heavy dew. Here he waited. He had a fresh cigar going just as he saw the fat shape of Dona Maria coming slowly through the dry grass longside the stage road. She parted the heavy shawl she wore wrapped around her head when she moved into the shadows under the trees.

"It all went very bad, Senor. The man knows now who killed the marshal. He has seen the earrings the fool, Tebo, gave Reva. He carries a sunflower spur he found, one that Senor Mace used to wear. On the roof of the shed, Senor. He—"

"That's enough," Frank DeGoya said, and gave the Mexican woman two silver dollars. *"Gracias."*

"The Senor Smith rode out from San Rosa a few minutes ago." Dona Maria turned suddenly and started back to the adobe roadhouse.

Frank DeGoya dropped his cigar to the ground, and ground it into the dirt with his heel. He had warned Mace about the dangers of becoming too deeply involved with a woman. Perhaps, he told himself grimly, he would plant sunflower seeds beside Tebo's grave. Tomorrow, early, he would ride to the Rolling M and talk to Fay Quarterone.

CHAPTER VII

Ace of Spades

THREE miles northwest of San Rosa, Jim Hatfield reached a small stream that tumbled down a canyon wall, and left the river and turned into a wide creek, Goldy's hoofs making a clatter on the gravel bottom. He doubted if DeGoya's riders left the trails unwatched any hour of the day, and he reined the sorrel away from the creek and toward a bunch of close-growing pinons. On their far side, he found himself on a plateau's edge, and below him the foothills rose in steadily mounting tiers toward a rugged moun-

tain range. He slipped out of the saddle, contemplating a dry camp here.

By this time, the Lone Wolf thought, Tebo Mace's life was as good as done. Dona Maria would have been paid for certain information, and DeGoya would go to any lengths to see that Mace never talked. There was something about DeGoya that would not leave Jim Hatfield alone. It vaguely hinted, as it brushed against his mind, that the man was a part of evil far remote from San Rosa. A hunch, the Ranger knew, but he had always respected those strong intuitive impressions.

He was instantly alert. Out of the wildness of this land came an unnatural sound. Night creatures had broken off their soothing medley, and even as he leaped to his feet, a gun shot hammered into the silence of the night. A bullet chipped the rimrock and whined out into space, and Hatfield, drawing a gun, pitched forward almost under Goldy's feet, a second bullet thudding into a chunk of rotten wood less than an inch from his ribs. He stayed down, head turned in the direction from which the shots came, giving spasmodic jerks to his legs.

A voice drifted in and over him: "You got him!"

"I figure to make sure," a man said, and the Lone Wolf heard saddle-leather creak, and then the slow advance of a man coming out of the pinons.

Hatfield watched the figure take definite shape. He waited until the man lifted the rifle he carried, then shot him dead. He heard the other rider's hoarse cry above the echoe of the gunshot, and was up and running, firing at the moving shadow near the bunch of trees. He stopped, ran back and got into the sorrel's saddle, then gave chase.

When he splashed across a shallow stream nearly two miles from the plateau's edge he saw his man streaking across a meadow and heading for a line of willows. He threw a shot, and the man ducked low in his saddle and began to lash at his horse with the straps. The willows swallowed him up, and without urging, the sorrel lengthened its stride.

Beyond the willows the ground rose abruptly into a boulder and juniper pocked hillside, and when he reached the summit, the Lone Wolf saw the little ranch buildings squatted in the curve of an almost dried creek below. Smoke curled from a shack's window. A bronc, its saddle empty was standing near an old corral, head down.

The door of the shack opened, and the figure of a woman was silhouetted against the lamplight. She called out, "Tom! Are you there, Tom?"

Hatfield saw his man then. He came out of the dark near the shack and slippped inside the house. The door shut quickly behind him. The Lone Wolf rode deliberately down the grade, watching the one lighted window.

The gunshots he expected never came. Instead, as he rode up to the shack's very door, the door swung open and a man peered out at him.

"All right, marshal," he said in a voice that was flat and laced with utter weariness. "I'm glad to be through with it all."

Hatfield stepped inside the shirt-tail ranchhouse, ignored the man and looked at the woman leaning against the table. She was not more than thirty, he figured, but there was far too much suffering and fear contained in her eyes for a person of her years.

She stared at Jim Hatfield, then let her shoulders sag and made a gesture of utter despair. She gave her husband a look of pity. "All right, take him," she said.

The Lone Wolf looked at the two-bit rancher and saw a beaten man. There was none of the innate hardness in him that belonged to Tebo Mace and the majority of DeGoya's toughs.

He said, "You were out to kill me, Mister. You came close."

The man shook his head, dropped into a chair and dropped his head in his hands. A sob shook him.

The woman spoke for him. "We're the Jewells, marshal. Tom was a good man, and never harmed a living soul until

Frank DeGoya got his dirty hands on him. We tried to hold onto what we had and stay honest, but we couldn't. The man has a grip on the whole valley. He bought the nesters' land and leased it back to them, and takes most of their profit. It is the same with small ranchers like Tom. He does what DeGoya says or he will have to either leave or fill an early grave. If you're the law, why did they send one man? You haven't any more chance than Tom."

"All right, Clara," the rancher said, and got to his feet. "No use in more talk, Marshal, I'm ready."

"You'll never get to San Rosa alive!" the woman said, and ran to her husband, her eyes bright with terror.

Jim Hatfield said, "I haven't been here, remember that," and walked to the door. When it closed behind him, the two-bit rancher and his wife just stood and stared at it. Out in the night the sorrels hoofs became fainter.

The woman said, "Who is he, Tom?"

"A United States marshal, Mace said."

"He's something more," Clara Jewell said. "I have never seen a man like him. His eyes, Tom. I watched his hands—"

The rancher nodded. "I saw him kill Lon Keely. He was flat on the ground, but he did it so fast Keely couldn't even pull trigger." He took his wife in his arms. "I have a feeling that DeGoya will have to run."

As Jim Hatfield rode the sorrel along a narrow cow trail skirting the steep hillside, thunder made an ominous rumble in the sky, and lightning flashed on the distant horizon, but the elements were no angrier than the Lone Wolf's troubled thoughts.

What man had a right to break the hearts and souls of people as if they were dry sticks in his hand? Or turn decent men into subjects for the hangman? He had met and completely smashed many such men, but he could not recall his having hated a man as much as he did Frank DeGoya. There was that insistent whispering at the edge of his conscious mind again.

JUST after dawn, in the long bunkhouse at the Rolling M, Tebo Mace lay awake in his bunk, the cold stub of a cigarette stuck at one corner of his mouth. Tebo stared at a tangled cobweb against the raftered ceiling and watched a blue-bottle fly try to extricate itself from the silken ropes that held it. And Tebo, with utter fascination, watched the big spider make its way toward the blue-bottle. It seemed in no hurry, confident in the web it had spun. The blue-bottle buzzed and beat its wings, but it became more entangled, and suddenly the spider darted in and wound its long legs around the blue-bottle, and soon it was dead.

Tebo's eyes were still fixed on the deadly web when Fay Quarterone came into the bunkhouse. Slowly his eyes gave the gunman attention, and an unease crept into his stomach, more discomforting than the wound in his leg. Quarterone stood there, a picture of arrogance, looking taller than he really was. There was a streaky brightness in his eyes. Tebo guessed it before the gunfighter spoke.

"I'm the new ramrod, Tebo," Quarterone said.

Mace looked up at the web again, a cold fear beginning to take hold of him. He looked back at Quarterone, clutching at a straw. "Last night, Fay. Did Keely and Jewell get him?"

The gunhawk shook his head. "Keely's horse came back in empty, Tebo. A couple of the boys are going out to check on Tom Jewell. Looks like the Lone Wolf is still alive. Looks like I'll have to take him, Tebo, before he gets to you."

Mace said desperately. "He couldn't ever make me talk, Fay. No matter what he did. You tell Frank. Tell Frank I'll start riding as soon as I can fork the claybank, Fay. Anyway, they can't prove—"

"Reva can," Fay Quarterone said.

The gunman got painfully out of his bunk, reached for an upright and missed. He fell, and a gust of agony came out of his throat. When Quarterone helped him back into the bunk, the blood was running from his wound again.

He said pleadingly, "Fay, help me get out of here!"

Quarterone laughed. "Hell, what would you do for me, Tebo?" He walked away, leaving the crippled gunfighter sick with fear.

Frank DeGoya rode into the yard an hour later, and Quarterone and four other gray-shirted slopers hurried to meet him. The new ramrod said, "Hatfield got Keely. He—"

DeGoya snapped impatiently, "I heard," and got down from his horse. "Get Mace's claybank saddled, Quarterone, and bring it over to the bunkhouse. I'll be there." He strode across the yard with the other three toughs and lowered his head as he stepped into the bunkhouse. He moved down the narrow aisle and stopped, and looked down at a frightened Tebo Mace.

Mace cried out, "Listen, Frank. They can't make me talk."

"You poor damned fool," DeGoya said. "Why didn't you go back for the spur?"

"I did, Frank. I couldn't find it."

"That Ranger did. We can all hang for killing a marshal. For stringing Sid Wahl up and for other things—if you live to get into the law's hands." DeGoya coldly bit the tip off a cigar and spat it against the gunman's chest. "You'd have to get away, Tebo. Hatfield figures that even now. And getting away, something happened that could easy happen to a man with only one good leg."

"No, Frank!" Mace struggled to get out of the bunk.

DeGoya shoved him back. "We'll help you up in a few minutes, Tebo."

Mace heard the claybank's hoofs grind against the gravel outside, and with a great effort he reached for the gunbelt that hung from a peg just above his head. DeGoya cracked him against the side of his head with a big fist and partly stunned him. When the gunfighter's vision cleared, he saw Fay Quarterone grinning at him.

"All right, Tebo, we're letting you take that ride," the boss man said.

Mace breathed like a badly wounded animal. His eyes, glazed with abject terror, were fixed on the stony countenance of Frank DeGoya. They slowly shifted to Quarterone's wicked grin and then lifted to the spider's web abainst the ceiling. His mouth began working.

"No, you can't, Frank," he blabbered, "The things I've done for you, remember? Let me stand up—help me up, Frank. I'll draw with Quarterone. Just a chance is all I ask."

"All right," DeGoya said and stepped back. Quarterone reached up to Tebo Mace's gunbelt and took one of the smooth-handled guns from a holster. He slammed it against the side of Mace's head, and the gunfighter fell limp in his bunk.

"Lift him up and take him out," DeGoya said, and walked through the cramped space between the rows of bunks and dropped into a chair by the table. He picked up a pack of greasy cards and began to riffle them. He did not look up as his toughs carried Tebo Mace out of the building.

He said, as Quarterone paused at the table, "You know what to do, Fay. Tie his good foot into the stirrip, and take him well out in the hills. If you spot Hatfield, shoot on sight."

"Sure," the gunman said. "How about Tebo's girl?"

DeGoya snapped. "Dona Maria has her locked in," and suddenly he saw the light of anticipation in his new foreman's hard eyes. "When you're finished with Tebo," he said angrily, "take a good look at him. I told him while he worked for me to leave women alone."

"Don't fret, Frank," the gunhawk laughed. "I never give them presents." He went out into the sunlight where Tebo Mace was slumped in the claybank's saddle. "Hurry and saddle up," he said. "Bring my bronc."

Frank DeGoya came out, the pack of cards still in his hand. One fell out and fluttered to Quarterone's feet. The gunman picked it up, looked at it, then handed it to DeGoya. His lips curled back from his teeth.

"Hell, Frank—the ace of spades!" he said.

DeGoya's eyes snapped angrily at Quar-

terone. Then his face sobered. Forcing a grin, he said, "I never believed in that. I never was superstitious."

"Me neither, Frank," the new ramrod flung back. "I don't believe in ghosts, but I'm afraid of them."

DEGOYA watched his riders take Tebo Mace away. He watched the execution party cut through the aspens half a mile from his yard, then start the climb into the hills. When they topped a second ridge, small moving dots in the distance, he walked into the bunkhouse, cursing the small doubt that Quarterone's droll philosophy had pushed into his mind.

He slammed the cards down, feeling the past moving in and crowding him, but telling himself there was no man alive bigger or more powerful. His splayed fingers brushed along his side just as a rider came into the yard, his horse at a gallop. He got up and took two long steps to the door and saw Saul Krebb.

Krebb's face looked half angry and half alarmed as he got out of his saddle. The sheriff said, "Don't do it, Frank," and stepped toward DeGoya. "Even little people will stand just so much brutal killing."

"Tebo?" DeGoya said. "You're too late, Saul." He gave the lawman a raking with his eyes. "What in hell has come over you, you big slob? That new marshal has emptied you of guts? You're in this, too, Krebb, the same as all of us. It is Tebo or a noose around your fat neck."

Krebb drew the knuckles of a fist across his forehead and sucked in his breath. "I guess that's the way it is, Frank."

"You're dead right, Saul."

Krebb got back into the saddle and rode out of the yard, swearing under his breath that he had done his last rotten chore for Frank DeGoya. A man can stand feeling unclean inside himself just so long, and it did not require too much intelligence on his part to know he would follow hard on Tebo Mace's heels to a lonely grave as soon as DeGoya had no further use for him. By sundown, Krebb told himself, he would have to put a lot of miles between him and San Rosa. A small town somewhere. Maybe a small hardware store—and maybe in time the smell would be off him.

He took a trail toward the Canon de Muerte, forded the Little Wind River which ran swiftly over a sandstone bottom, and the silt-laden water nearly reached the belly of his chestnut. He swung up the far bank and up to a ridge, the trail looping back and forth between points of rock. Beyond this the country became as desolate as his thoughts; there were spare stands of grama grass, a few cedars and shadscale.

When he reached a ridge-top, he heard the clatter of a group of horsemen and tried to swing the chestnut into a small stand of pine. It slipped and almost fell on a flat rock surfacing, and then he knew he was seen. Five riders came down a switchback, and the man in the lead lifted his hand.

Krebb knew the Rolling M puncher, a tall splinter of a man with a milky right eye. Yoder, they called him. Yoder rode up to him, his small eyes narrowed. "You know, Sheriff, it just come to my mind that you had the look of a man beginning a long ride. It ain't like you to be riding alone, not with that Lone Wolf loose in these hills."

The riders moved in and pressed the chestnut close, and Krebb thought dismally, *why did I think I could run?* He stared at Yoder and forced a smile. "A man gets big ideas after too long a stop in the Camino Real. I was thinking how big I could be if I could bring the Lone Wolf's hide in and nail it to the door. Well, the whisky wore off, Yoder."

Yoder, Krebb saw, was not convinced. "Come along," the man said sharply, and his dream of release was shattered. DeGoya, he knew, would be less convinced. His time was fast running out. Inwardly he cursed the day he had sacrificed pride and principle for promises of wealth that had never materialized.

"You've been spooked, Saul," Yoder said, and laughed loudly as they dipped down into a wide arroyo. "Hell, you'd think a troop of United States cavalry

had moved in here, not one lone man carrying a Ranger's badge. They've built jiggers into bogey men before. With hides that are bullet proof. When we've got that Lone Wolf in a corner, Sheriff, he'll beg for his life like any poor loser."

Saul Krebb thought desperately, I could end it all here. I could take at least a couple of these toughs to hell with me. But the courage he reached for was not there. There was not time left, he mused bitterly, even if he lived another fifty years, to qualify him for a place in the human race again.

Jim Hatfield, ever conscious of the movements of men in the hills around him, struck across the far corner of DeGoya's range. The ground rose to his left, and about a hundred yards up the knob, there was a thick stand of mountain ash and box elder. As the sorrel buckled into the slope, the Lone Wolf regretted not having made a try to take Tebo Mace to Alpine when he had uncovered his guilt, yet at the time he knew his chances of getting him to a lockup was one in ten thousand. And Yount's jail, he remembered, had not looked too formidable. He considered then, as he did now, that Tebo was the pawn on the grim chessboard, and DeGoya's next move had to be Mace's elimination.

This was one of the rare occasions when Jim Hatfield was not fully decided on his next move. Since leaving Tom Jewell's place, he had played hare and hounds with DeGoya's riders in an attempt to get close to the Rolling M ranch buildings. That was where they had taken Tebo Mace. When he reached the cover of the trees, he felt the sorrel tremble under him, and instantly he heard the soft drum of hoofs somewhere below the knob. The voices of men brushed against his ears, then all the sounds gradually faded.

The sensible plan would be to wait for the dark, Hatfield thought. They said of him that he recognized no odds in the blackness of night. It was then that his sharp senses were even more acute, his movements even more elusive.

Out of the saddle, he made his way to the edge of the box elders and looked down on the country spread out below. He saw half a dozen horsemen, throwing dust behind them, become swallowed up in a thin stretch of timber. A few minutes later he picked them up again, small insect-like figures moving slowly across a bench-land. They stopped and bunched together, then moved on again, changing direction.

Hunkering down, he made a cigarette, and put himself in Frank DeGoya's mind. His back was to the wall, his guilt beginning to show, and now he had to arrange for another killing. Perhaps he would wait until Tebo Mace got strong enough to leave his bunk, and then he would have Fay Quarterone whipsaw him into drawing.

The Lone Wolf quickly straightened and shouldered his way through the trees. Goldy stamped nervously, her nostrils flaring. Long reaching echoes banged across the rolling foothills, sounds fractured by the ever-rising wind. The racket

A small TEXAS TALE

LIKE A FOX

AN OLD Negro had been called to the witness stand in the trial of a friend who was accused of stealing.

"How long have you known the accused?" asked the prosecuting attorney.

"I reckon I known him for 'bout a year and a half."

"And would you consider him a thief?"

"Well, suh, I wouldn't 'zactly considah him a thief, but if I was a chicken, I can tell you I'd sho' nuff roost mighty high."

—Howie Lasseter

builtup as Jim Hatfield half-ran and half-slid down the side of the knob to fetch up against a fissured out-cropping of rock, and bracing himself against it, the rapid hoofbeats of horses, whipped to the full lengths of their strides, became a small thunder in his ears. There was a gunshot, a horse's frightened squeal, and the shrill yells punchers used hazing a herd.

CHAPTER VIII

Mad Slaughter

HORSEMEN came over the top of a ridge off to the left, partly obscured by a great cloud of dust, and then Hatfield saw that the horse well out in front of the others was riderless. It brought itself up short and stiffened its front legs, slid down to the foot of the ridge and nearly rolled over. The Lone Wolf suddenly saw the thing dragging from its right stirrup, and not until the clay bank struggled to all fours did he recognize it as a man.

A sickness and a building rage welled up in him when the three riders lashed the claybank into a run again. The inanimate thing was dragged cruelly through the brush. It bounded over the rocks at the foot of a low bench and was swung against the trunk of a bull-pine when the lathered, fear-crazed horse swerved sharply.

Throwing all caution aside, the Lone Wolf drew a Peacemaker as the claybank came running straight toward the knob. He knew that the shapeless thing, twisting and rolling beside it, had been Tebo Mace, and not even such a man as Mace deserved this horrible death. The riders trailing behind were still yelling like punchers on a wild spree in town, and the Lone Wolf came out from the lee of the rock and threw a shot at a man riding a steeldust bronc. The man swayed in the saddle, missed a wild try for the saddle-horn and tumbled to the ground.

The Lone Wolf ran down the slope, his guns flaming and jumping in his hands. He hit another rider and knew the man was dead before he fell clear of his horse. His last shot fell short of the man streaking for the safety of the timber. He then ran up to the boxelders and threw himself astride the sorrel. The gunshots, he knew, would bring other DeGoya riders here, but he wanted proof of cold-blooded murder.

He finally crowded the badly spent claybank against the wall of a box canyon, and tried not to look at the thing still tied to the stirrup. He hurriedly cut away the rawhide strings that had bound the gunfighter's boots to the stirrup, and crammed them into his pocket. One quick glance at what was left of Tebo put nausea into his stomach, and now he realized fully what manner of man he was dealing with.

The sorrel's head abruptly lifted. But Jim Hatfield had not heeded the warning. The murmur of the movement of a bunch of riders washed through a line of jack-pines fringing one side of the canyon. Shouts came from another direction, carried to him by the gusty wind.

He hit leather quickly and rode up the box-canyon and found a short of flume at its dead end. He got out of the saddle. Goldy, without pressure, began the twenty-foot climb up the perilous crude stairway that had been gouged out of the wall by flood waters of hundreds of years. More than once the Lone Wolf thought the sorrel stud would loose its footing on the slippery edges and exposed tree roots and probably come crashing down upon him. But Goldy scrambled to the top, and blowing hard, swung his head and let his dangling straps drop within reach of his rider's up-flung hand. The horse stood stiff-legged, head bent, and gave Hatfield the leverage to pull himself to safety.

He slapped the sorrell affectionately, got quickly into the saddle, and rode toward the inviting mouth of a pass nearly hidden by heavy timber less than half a mile ahead. All around him he heard the sounds of men closing in, and he pulled his rifle from its boot.

He knew that this was Frank DeGoya's

all-out effort. Mace was dead, his lips forever sealed. When a Ranger was dead, DeGoya would bleed the valley and its people of the substance it had left and then move on, before McDowell's men came in force. And Hatfield knew, a shudder running through him, that not a trace of Jim Hatfield or his sorrel horse would ever be found in the event of his death.

He heard the run of horses clearer, and he quickened Goldy's pace. He was at the gap's mouth when the first flat whipcrack of a rifle cut through the beat of his horse's hoofs. A bullet whined, but fell short. He threw a quick glance westward and saw the riders dropping off a low bench. But the shouts he heard were behind him.

He rode swiftly through the gap, aggravated by the abstract sensation that the galloping sorrel was standing still, that only the rocks and the hills and the trees were rushing past, mile by mile. He came out of the gap and saw the silver twisting of a creek in the afternoon sun, and he splashed across it and made for the prow of a ridge dead ahead. Beyond this, the hills rose, tier upon tier, timbered and rock-scarred, and there was one great patch of brown where fire must have once swept.

As the hard running sorrel swept around the prow of the ridge, the Ranger saw five horsemen dead ahead, and coming on. He threw up his rifle and pumped three shots into them scattering them to each side of the rutted road. Goldy spun to the right at his bidding and scrambled up the side of the ridge, digging her steel-shod hoofs through the pine needles to keep a foothold.

All around him now, Jim Hatfield heard the beat of hoofs and the blood cry of DeGoya's hired toughs. He came to the summit, and a bullet chugged into the trunk of a pine less than two feet from his head. He threw an answering shot and a black bronc ran out from under its dead rider. He raced along the ridge, bent low in the saddle, bullets reaching for him, coming closer.

He dropped down the side of the dog-leg ridge and into the mouth of a wide canyon where a rushing stream set up a roar too big for its size. The floor began lifting as he followed it. Up ahead was a stretch of heavy woodland that could be the difference between life and death.

The Lone Wolf suddenly pulled Goldy up and jumped to the rocky ground. Riders came spilling down the canyon wall. He dropped his rifle and drew his Peacemakers, backed away until his shoulders felt the pressure of a big boulder. DeGoya's men were slipping from their saddles, firing as they dropped. Jim Hatfield stood there and emptied his guns, leaving three toughs dead on the canyon floor.

The last man on his feet was diving for cover when another group of riders clattered up behind. The Lone Wolf, as he suddenly realized that this was his end, felt a terrific blow against the side of his head. He went down, instinctively trying to get his hands on a vague shape that seemed to undulate in front of his failing vision.

He heard a distant voice yell, "Got him, Fay," as the world fell out from under his feet.

DULL pain returned with the Lone Wolf's consciousness. Gradually landmarks around him took definite shape, as did DeGoya's riders. He put a hand to the side of his head and his fingers came away stained with blood.

A voice, familiarly dry and coldly impersonal said, "Creased your skull, Ranger."

He turned his head slowly and looked at Fay Quarterone. The gunfighter flipped a badge up and down in the palm of his hand, then threw it at the Lone Wolf's feet. "Should have tumbled who you were up in Kelso Springs, Hatfield."

The Ranger leaned forward and was about to pick up the star-in-circle badge when Quarterone jumped forward and kicked it out of his reach. It went spinning into the rushing stream.

"What do you need it for?" Quarterone mocked.

Jim Hatfield, his head a solid ache, lift-

ed himself to his feet. His hands fell against his empty holsters, and then he saw the crumpled mass that had been Tebo Mace, and he said, "You dirty, soulless dogs!"

Quarterone hit him, and he felt his lower lip crack as he pitched backward. Somehow he managed to retain his footing, and he spat the blood that came from his mouth at the gunfighter's feet. Helpless rage blazed in his pain-ridden jade-green eyes. It whitened the tanned flesh around his mouth.

"Why haven't you finished it, Quarterone?" he fairly shouted.

The gunfighter turned to two of his men. "Tie his hands behind him," he ordered. He sat down on a boulder and grinned up at the Lone Wolf. "The boss will decide what will be done with you, Hatfield. For you it has to be something real special." He built a smoke while the Lone Wolf's hands were securely tied behind him. "Too bad, Ranger. Looks like I'll never know if I could beat you to a draw."

"You would never have the guts, Quarterone," the Lone Wolf said. "You're a loud-mouthed, tinhorn gunman. You could have given Tebo Mace a chance to die with a gun in his hand if you weren't, but it's in my mind you were afraid of a one-legged man."

Quarterone leaped to his feet, lips pulled back from his teeth, and his right hand closed around the butt of his six-gun. Suddenly he let the hand drop. He laughed.

"It won't work, Hatfield," he said. "You're not tempting me into it. All right, you jiggers, lead that sorrel bronc over here. Then load this jigger in his saddle."

"How about the burying of these men, Fay?" a rider asked.

"They can wait," the gunfighter snapped, and Hatfield's blood ran slow and cold. "Five for one, Hatfield, but don't think for a minute you got the better of the deal."

They rode out of the canyon and across a flat bench into heavy timber. Quarterone drew abreast of the prisoner and brought up the subject of an old debt. "I recollect you saving my life in Kelso Springs, Hatfield, and I also recall you denying that you did. My hide, you said, wasn't worth as much as the skin of that sorrel stud you're riding. Then you ordered me out of town like any saddlebum. I never forgot that, Hatfield."

The Lone Wolf stared straight ahead, and kept silent. His Peacemakers were in the gunbelt they had draped over his saddlehorn, but they might as well have been back in Austin.

"Just the same, Hatfield," Quarterone went on, "I might have paid that debt if my luck hadn't broken a certain way. I've got big plans ahead. They could be knocked from here to hell and breakfast if you stayed alive. What beats me is why a salt cuss like you wants to be so noble and honest. With your gun savvy, you could've—well, you just took the wrong trail, Hatfield."

Well out of the woodland, as they crossed a stretch of meadow, they met with another bunch of riders, and Jim Hatfield saw that Saul Krebb was one of them. Krebb's eyes lined with his and he gave the sheriff of San Rosa the sharpest cut of his eyes.

"You have a lot of deputies, Krebb," Jim called out. "Don't tell me you swear them in with the Bible."

The rider named Yoder laughed. "Looks like we can all breathe easier, Sheriff," he said. "How about Tebo, Fay?"

The gunhawk grinned. "He would try to ride his claybank with one leg."

Jim Hatfield looked at Fay Quarterone, remembering a slack-jawed man coming into Kelso Springs. He could see the man's frightened face again as he backed up against the stable, just a run-of-the-mill gunfighter caught between two fires. Now Quarterone was swelled by the same bigness and arrogance of Frank DeGoya who had made him his ramrod. He sat his horse with his shoulders thrown back, Number Two man in San Rosa and the valley that fed it, and surveyed these other men with a streaky tolerance. The Long Wolf swung his eyes back to Saul

Krebb, a picture of utter abjection, and wondered what kind of a man he had been in his younger days.

Quarterone said, "Get those broncs moving. I can't wait to see the look in his eyes when he sees what we've got here."

Jim Hatfield saw no loophole of escape and a rueful smile played around his mouth as he rode across the shallows of the Little Wind River, remembering a line in McDowell's telegram that had sent him here. *Will send more men if needed.*

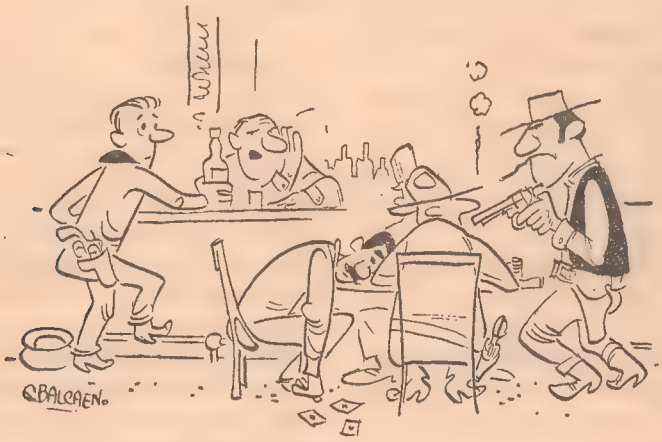
the big yard.

Five men came out of the bunkhouse, and Jim Hatfield recognized Ned Blue, the man he had knocked over in Alpine. The gunfighter, his arm in a sling, shaded his eyes from the lowering sun and squinted at the approaching riders.

Suddenly he yelled, "By damn, you got him, Quarterone!"

"Where's Frank DeGoya?" the ramrod asked.

"Up at the house," Blue said, and grimaced at Jim Hatfield. "Hell, the boss has



"Don't pay no mind to him, son—he's just one of them sore losers."

Apparently the Ranger boss, the Lone Wolf mused drearily, was what learned men called psychic. Despite the stories they had built around Jim Hatfield, Bill McDowell knew the man was only human. He could die as quickly as other men. Thinking of Tebo Mace, Hatfield doubted that.

THREE miles further on, Jim Hatfield looked down from a grassy hillside at DeGoya's ranch-buildings, the big corral, and the twin wind-mills. The house, built by the Ortegas, was of adobe and fronted by a double-deck porch. Giant cottonwoods gave it shade. The riders crossed a planked bridge where the ground flattened out, rode slowly between two lines of aspens bent to the wind, and then into

been stomping this yard like a panther. Swearing to gun you down if you slipped up, Fay."

Goldy nickered softly as she started up the grade toward the ranchhouse, as if she knew this was the last time she would carry the Lone Wolf on her back. At the moment, Jim Hatfield would have bargained with the devil himself for just one chance at the guns draped over the pommel in front of him. All the way in he had been working at the bonds that held him, but Quarterone's men had made doubly sure they would hold him.

Frank DeGoya had heard his riders come in. He was waiting on the porch, coatless, a dead cigar clenched between his teeth.

Quarterone shouted, "Frank, we've got

Hatfield!" and raked his horse with his spurs, riding the last few yards at a gallop, then cruelly yanking the horse half around, its hoofs throwing gravel against DeGoya's legs.

DeGoya yelled, "Damned if you haven't, Fay!" and came off the porch. He grabbed the reins of the sorrel stud, and slammed them across her nose, twisting the bit in her mouth.

Hatfield yelled, "Your time will come, DeGoya!" and got a foot loose and kicked the man in the ribs.

DeGoya, madness in his eyes, reached up and pulled the Lone Wolf to the ground, and the Ranger, despite his bound hands, kneed and butted DeGoya until the man scrambled to his feet, blood running down the side of his mouth.

"Bring him into the house, Fay," DeGoya ordered, hardly able to speak. "Put his horse in the corral, and if it gives you trouble, beat the hell out of it."

Three men picked Hatfield up and shoved him into the ranchhouse. They threw him heavily into a chair.

"You'd better start running, you scum!" the Lone Wolf growled. "You'll all hang as sure as the sun will rise and set tomorrow!"

"The Rangers?" DeGoya asked, and sneered as he planted himself in front of the Lone Wolf. "All good and true men, Hatfield!" He laughed. "Like the one named Sugden, maybe, who shot a man in the back of the skull and carried a fortune away with him."

"You're a liar, DeGoya," the Lone Wolf said.

"Get a bottle out of the closet, Fay," the rancher said. "We all drink to this night!" He heard Saul Krebb's breath sough slowly out and threw his glance that way. His eyes narrowed. "What brought you out of San Rosa, Saul."

"Frank, I got restless. A man wants to get in on things," Krebb said, and threw a spiteful look at Jim Hatfield. "Hell, I wanted a crack at that Ranger!"

DeGoya swept his eyes over the men around him, and grinned crookedly. "You'll get it, Saul. I promise you that!"

Quarterone brought two bottles from the closet and set them on the table. "Drink up," DeGoya said. "You'd better let the sheriff have the first drink. And the last."

The Lone Wolf watched this hard-bitten crew drink to his finish, Saul Krebb took more than his share, and when he banged an empty bottle down, he looked at the Ranger and said, "It'll be a pleasure, by God, to do a job on you."

Frank DeGoya went over by a stone fireplace and put his back against it. He lit a cigar, then fixed his hard eyes on the Texas Ranger.

"You'll disappear from the face of the earth, Hatfield. And your sorrel horse! I've got a hay barn a little over two miles from here. Too bad—a saddle tramp figured to spend the night inside, and he led his horse in. Maybe he was drunk or he would have heard the wooden bar drop in place outside. He figured to have a smoke, and while the cigarette was burning, he fell asleep. In the morning there was a heap of ashes and two things that had once been a man and his horse."

Saul Krebb went to the door, opened it, and stepped outside. DeGoya laughed contemptuously. "Belly turned upside down again. You'll see that Saul strikes the match, Quarterone."

Jim Hatfield tried desperately to keep a feeling of horror below the surface. He pictured in his mind the golden sorrel caught in roaring flames, screaming with pain, and he struggled against the rawhide thongs that bound his wrists. He got out of the chair and DeGoya slammed him with a fist and knocked him to the floor.

Quarterone and another tough yanked him to his feet and flung him into the chair again. "You're not that tough, Ranger!" the gunfighter said.

"Take him down to the bunkhouse," Frank DeGoya said. "Keep two men on him. Wait till dark to go to the hay barn, just on the off-chance someone might see you. I'm going into San Rosa. Ride in after it's done, Quarterone, and give me the details."

The Lone Wolf looked at DeGoya, at a loss to understand this man who had dropped below the level of a beast. Never had he seen more evil and ruthlessness in what was supposed to be a human being.

DeGoya, aware of the revulsion in the Ranger's eyes, said, "While you're waiting, Ranger, ask yourself if your righteousness and the things you believe in can get you out of this. By your creed, I should be the damned, waiting for my punishment." He laughed mockingly and left the house.

Quarterone said, "You have an answer to that one, Hatfield?"

"Fay, you're ten times a fool!" the Lone Wolf said. "They'll hunt you down until there isn't a space on earth big enough to hide you."

"Too bad you won't ever know about it, Hatfield." Quarterone gestured two men to their feet. "Take him out."

CHAPTER IX

Night Ride

JIM HATFIELD, walking between these two men, and was half way across the big yard when he fell back a step. They took hold of him and shoved him roughly forward. Now that insistent voice that had been groping at the edge of his mind made itself heard. The Austin paper had said nothing about a bullet hole in the back of a skull. Only Gird Drysdale had mentioned that. There had been no mention of it in the Alpine weekly that Roy Yount had shown him. There was no newspaper in San Rosa. But DeGoya knew that Sugden had been shot in the back of the head!

Even in the presence of the undertaker and Sheriff McSantry back at the graveyard in Kelso Springs the Lone Wolf had not committed himself as to the identity of the remains. All others had been guessing, but DeGoya had sounded positive. Too dead certain. Too late, Jim Hatfield thought bleakly. It could not matter now.

He was taken inside the long bunkhouse and pitched into a vacant bunk, and a tough said, "It belonged to Lon Keely. Say hello to him for me, Ranger!"

The guards began a game of cards at the far end of the bunkhouse. Again the Lone Wolf struggled desperately to get his hands loose. The sweat poured off his face, and the veins at his temples stood out. He ached in every muscle when he gave up. He heard the sorrel wicker out in the corral, and everything inside him formed into a cold and tightening knot. Never, during his long and lonely rides, had he dreamed of such an end as this.

The small patch of sunlight on the puncheon floor was soon gone. The Lone Wolf heard the loud clang of the cook's triangle, and soon talk and laughter came from the Rolling M grub shack. It had been a day of violence, and five of their kind had died, yet this wolf pack was laughing. The shivers ran the length of Hatfield's spine, and he recalled DeGoya's parting words and caught himself pondering them. He shook them loose from his mind, holding onto the faith that had been taught him in the not so long ago.

Quarterone and Saul Krebb came into the bunkhouse when the insects out in the yard began their small racket. "All right, Ranger, it is time for a ride," the gunfighter said hoarsely, and came down the narrow aisle. "Get up!"

"You're rotten, Quarterone," the Lone Wolf said, and slid his legs over the side of the bunk. Suddenly he lashed out with a boot and drove its heel deep into the gunman's stomach. Quarterone's breath came out of him with one painful gasp and he fell against the wall, jackknifed there and began to retch.

"Come on, Krebb," Hatfield yelled. "Use your gun on me—if you've got a spark of decency in your bloated body!"

"Dammit, get outside!" the sheriff choked out, and caught the Ranger by the arm and sent him staggering along the aisle.

Quarterone, recovering, nearly lost control, but Krebb roared, "No, not here, you

damned fool!"

Jim Hatfield went out into the yard. He stood, a numbness coursing through him, watching a man lead Goldy out of the corral.

Quarterone, bright hate burning out of his eyes, taunted: "Pretty, ain't he, Ranger? Too bad you won't get a look at him in the morning. Ever see what's left of a bronc when a stable burns down?"

The Lone Wolf felt sick when the sorrel came in close and nuzzled his nose against his shoulder. Goldy seemed to know. It was in his eyes. This was the sorrel's goodbye.

"Get him in the saddle," Fay Quarterone said, and picked three men to go along with Krebb and himself.

One of the toughs backed off. The gunfighter said, "You lily-livered fool, Ollie. It's the Ranger's neck or yours."

Jim Hatfield forced a laugh. "A speck of decency in this crew, Quarterone?"

The puncher named Ollie said tightly, "All right, Fay. All right," and got to his buckskin's rig.

Quarterone swung into the saddle of a grulla and rode slowly toward the gate. Jim Hatfield looked up at the sky that had mostly been the only roof to shelter him for countless nights. Riding out of the Rolling M yard, he involuntarily worked at his bonds again, and knew they had been loosened slightly for the blood was coursing freely through his wrists again. But they had been expertly tied. Saul Krebb rode just behind him; he could hear the sheriff's labored breathing.

"It's a clear night," the Lone Wolf said. "Not a good setting for a murder. I hope you'll sleep sound tonight, Krebb."

"Shut up!" the lawman said stridently. "Hell, you asked for it, Hatfield."

Up ahead, Quarterone laughed. "A big, brave front," he said, and turned in the saddle and looked at he Ranger. "In sight of the barn, you'll start begging for your life, Hatfield. Like Tebo Mace. You'll be on your knees when I knock the lights out of you with a sixgun. It was in DeGoya's mind to let you and the bronc burn alive."

They crossed the planked bridge, the hoofs of the horses pounding out reverberating hollow sounds, and Hatfield, when they got to the low-hanging bluff, looked far up the valley toward the mission and wondered what Father Alfredo would say of him. And then he looked at the guns hanging over the pommel like a thirst-crazed man looks at cool water he can't quite reach. He tugged at his bonds again although he knew it was a futile gesture.

Goldy followed close behind Quarterone's grulla as the trail lifted toward the high Rolling M meadows, its head held high, and showing its rider not a single tremor, and the terrible dryness took hold of the Lone Wolf's throat again when he thought of the pain the magnificent horse would know before the fire consumed him.

Fay Quarterone reined in when they reached a plateau where DeGoya cattle grazed. His white teeth flashed in the gathering dark, and he pointed upward. Jim Hatfield could see the barn, less than a mile away, and he caught the sweet scent of hay in the meadow that had yet to be bunched and stored away.

"It'll make quite a torch, Ranger," the ramrod said.

"Look, Fay," the puncher named Ollie said chokingly. "Let's get it over with."

"I'm running this outfit," the gunfighter said. "Don't tell me what to do!" He slowly built a smoke, set it going, then prodded the grulla and guided it across the flat land.

SAUL KREBB said, when they were close to the foot of a wooded ridge, "Wait, Quarterone. I've got to take a look at this Ranger's hands. He's been working at them rawhides until—"

"A good idea," Quarterone flung over his shoulder. "Make damned sure the rope is tight, Saul."

Jim Hatfield felt the foam from the nose of Krebb's horse spatter against his cheek as the sheriff came almost abreast of him. Krebb's breathing was like that of a man who had been running a long distance.

The Lone Wolf's heart suddenly pounded against his ribs. He felt the cold-

ness of a knife-blade against his wrists, felt a violent tug at the rawhide and heard Krebb's desperately hurried voice: "Grab your gun, Hatfield!"

He felt the bonds give at a second slash of the knife, and he pitched forward, his right hand pulling a Peace maker from its holster. Quarterone was already firing. The Lone Wolf heard a choking cry from Saul Krebb as he threw a shot at the tough next to the man named Ollie. He heard the bullet hit, and knew the man was dead when he hit the ground.

Fay Quarterone, screaming and cursing, tried to lay a shot at the Ranger, but the sorrel had catapulted toward the grulla at its rider's first shot. The grulla squealed as Goldy crashed into it, and the Lone Wolf emptied his Peacemaker at one of DeGoya's men forking a bay horse. The man threw up both hands, and his head snapped back. He was thrown clear of the bay, his death cry whipped away by the wind.

Jim Hatfield got out of his saddle, drawing his other sixgun, and he pivoted swiftly and saw that Quarterone had been unhorsed and was getting to his feet near an old windfall. These two men were the only ones left on their feet. The man named Ollie had run.

"Now, Quarterone!" the Lone Wolf yelled in savage eagerness, strapping his gunbelt about his waist with his left hand, then deliberately pouching his gun. "The odds are even. What have you got to say with your big mouth now? How big are you, you snake?"

Jim's eyes blazed with all their intensity, and Fay Quarterone backed away from them, his face gray in the gathering darkness, and fear putting a bright shine in his eyes. He turned his face away for a moment, tilting his head to the side as if listening.

"They won't get here in time, Fay!" Jim Hatfield said. "I'm giving you just three seconds to pull that gun. If you don't, you die anyway! One—"

Quarterone took a step forward, "Listen, Hatfield. Look, I—" And then, reading no compromise in the Lone Wolf's cold and deadly stare, Fay Quarterone's right hand made its desperately hurried bid. Jim Hatfield drew and fired, heard the heavy slug smash through flesh and bone before Quarterone's gun cleared leather.

The gunfighter went crashing back against a big dead limb thrust out from the fallen tree, his wrists breaking in front of him. He staggered three steps forward, his eyes no longer bright and wicked, fighting for the strength to bring the muzzle of his Colt up.

Without an ounce of remorse, Jim Hatfield fired another shot at Quarterone, and hit the gunfighter squarely between the eyes. It was like killing a mad beast, no more, no less. He wasted but a glance at the dead man, then ran to the spot where Saul Krebb had fallen.

The sheriff was nearly gone. Jim Hatfield saw the splotches high on the man's chest, the dark stain around his mouth. He lifted Krebb's head from the ground and made a pillow with his hat. He knelt down.

"Thanks, Sheriff," he said, hoping he was heard.

Krebb's eyes partly opened. With an effort he opened them wide, seeming to squint through the film of gray settling over them. His lips moved. He gave Jim Hatfield a small smile, and said in a hoarse whisper. "M-Made up—some. A little. I—"

"A good man, Sheriff," the Lone Wolf said. "You're a good man. Easy now—take your time." He saw that the man could no longer see or hear him, and never would again.

He gently took his hat out from under his head and came to his feet like an uncoiled spring at the sorrel's sudden nicker. Goldy was on the move when he reached her on the run, and she was half way across the plateau before he had settled into the saddle. Somewhere on the ridgeback above and behind him, riders were moving in fast. The ground abruptly lifted under the sorrel's flying feet at the plateau's farthest reach, and he picked up a cow-trail that spiralled up to a great shoulder of rimrock.

The Lone Wolf rode into a stand of timber and let the sorrel blow, letting himself become slack in the saddle. Those riders, after they had seen enough, would move hell for leather into San Rosa, and once there would throw a ring of protection around DeGoya.

Jim Hatfield, reaction having its way with him, felt the quivering of Goldy's sleek and sweaty hide, and he leaned forward and ran his fingers through the long mane to quiet the horse. He knew that DeGoya could blame the murder of Tom Ryle on Tebo Mace who was dead. He could make a charge against Fay Quarter-one concerning the deaths of Sid Wahl and now Saul Krebb, but the weakness in his armor, unknown to the man, was that Jim Hatfield knew his real identity.

DeGoya, the Lone Wolf felt certain, would not run, and for two reasons. There were rich assets to be liquidated. And there was his hate for a Texas Ranger that transcended all other emotions. The possession of power, too, was the man's food and drink.

The Lone Wolf waited for another hour. Hunkered down at the edge of the rimrock, he watched the storm clouds gather in the sky. Lightning flashed, and was followed by the sullen rumble of thunder. In a second flash, he caught a glimpse of the crucifix on the mission San Gabriel standing against the sky. And suddenly he got up and walked to the sorrel, a definite plan in his mind. The odds against the success of it were great, but it was a calculated risk he had to take.

A few minutes later, he dropped off the rim, the first drops of rain beating against his face and began the ride to Father Alfredo's mission. One big factor was in his favor, and he was grateful. He hoped the storm would last.

DURING the two-mile journey he saw not a sign of a single rider. The rain was not too heavy until he came into the mission yard, and then it fell in great wind-blown sheets. Leaving Goldy in the old shed just inside the wide yard, the Lone Wolf ran to the front door of the mission and banged on it with his fist.

In a few moments, the old Padre appeared, and swung the massive door inward. He said quickly, "Senor Smith," and stepped aside to let Hatfield pass.

"Senor Hatfield, Texas Ranger," the Lone Wolf said, and he looked across the dimly lighted room and saw two women huddled in the corner next to the fireplace. They were Reva and Dona Maria.

"I see you have guests, Padre," he said dryly. "How much of their sins have you washed away?"

"They are badly frightened, Senor," Father Alfredo said. "They are afraid of this DeGoya. Where else would they go, my friend?"

"Padre," the Lone Wolf said. "I must have your cassock, unless you have a spare one." He dropped into a chair and began removing his boots. "Hurry, Padre, for I must get into San Rosa tonight. I hope your donkey is well rested."

"It is impossible, Senor. Most certainly they will try to kill you again," Father Alfredo said, and then he saw the edginess, the impatience in the Lone Wolf's greenish eyes, and said quickly, "There is a cassock I can give you, Senor. It belonged to Father Bernard, God rest his soul, who sleeps just outside the gate."

"You are a fool!" Dona Maria said.

Father Alfredo brought the cassock, and a pair of straw sandals and stood and watched the Lone Wolf roll his Levis up to his knees. He shook his old head doubtfully. "You are too much of a strong and healthy man, Senor, to pass for this poor priest."

Hatfield took off his hat and said to Father Alfredo, "You have a sack I can put my hat and boots in, Padre?"

The priest nodded, and suddenly remembered a name. Hatfield? A Ranger? Why this must be the great Jim Hatfield. Just now did it came to him, and his lips moved as he looked up at the ceiling. Suddenly he turned and shuffled away, a prayer for the safety of this good man on his lips.

Father Bernard must have been more than a fair specimen of a man, the Ranger

thought, as he donned the cassock Father Alfredo brought him. He tied the braided cords loosely around his waist so there were no bulges where he wore the Peacemakers. The padre had him sit down while he adjusted the crude sandals to his feet.

The storm grew in fury outside; the driving rain rattled the casements. Jim Hatfield got up, his face mostly hidden by the priestly cowl. "I leave you my sorrel, Padre, as a guarantee for your donkey's safe return."

"A prayer goes with you, Senor," Father Alfredo said. "It is the best help a very old man can offer you."

The girl, Reva, got up and came away from the fireplace. "Senor, please forgive me," she said to the Lone Wolf. "For the rest of my life I will do penance."

Dona Maria said, "Little fool. DeGoya will take you from here. He will kill you to keep your tongue still."

Jim Hatfield, carrying the gunnysack containing his hat and boots, went out into the plaza, and bent his head against the storm. He led Goldy to the stable, unsaddled him and put a bridle on the padre's donkey.

The golden sorrel's whinny sounded very much like a laugh to the Lone Wolf as he led the small animal out into the yard and got astride it. It laid its ears back against the driving needles of rain, and the Ranger had to exert some pressure before it started at a reasonable gait down the long twisting road that led into San Rosa. At first he had difficulty maintaining his balance on the donkey while keeping his sandal-shod feet from scraping through the mud.

Half way down the old road, he heard the short blubber of a horse cut into the whine of the wind, and his hand stole inside his cassock. A rider loomed up, blocking the road. He came nearer and the Lone Wolf's fingers closed around the handle of his gun.

"You, Padre?" the man shouted. "It must be a big soul you're trying to save on such a night!"

Jim Hatfield tried to make his voice sound old. "It is so, my friend," he called out, and prodded the donkey with his knees. The rider laughed and drew back from the road, and the Ranger breathed in deep.

A voice, partly whipped away by the howling wind, mocked: "It is the devil's night out, Padre. See that you beat him to the draw."

CHAPTER X

Gunfire

THE eerie glow from San Rosa's lights crept ever nearer. The Lone Wolf passed over the rotting planks of a bridge and a few minutes later he could hear some of the racket coming from the town. Lightning flashed. Not fifty yards ahead, a man sat a horse at the side of the road, and again the Ranger's hand groped under the cassock for the handle of a sixgun.

A great gust of wind swept in and blew the cowl from his head. Lightning flashed again, and Jim Hatfield fired through the cloth of his cassock even as a startled curse came from the man directly in front of him. Thunder rolled and echoed, swallowing up the sound of the sixgun. The Lone Wolf heard the man fall, and he had to swing the donkey quickly to the side of the road to keep it from being trampled by the man's frightened horse. Shelter from the storm beckoning just ahead, and the donkey broke into a faster run.

Jim Hatfield came into an areaway near a lumberyard at the northern edge of San Rosa, and slipped off the donkey's back. "Gracias, little amigo," he said under his breath, and quickly discarded his clumsy cassock. He tore the sandals off his feet and pulled on his boots. Yanking the brim of his hat well down over his eyes he moved cautiously to the alley's outlet into the main street.

The lamps gave off watery yellow blobs in the opaqueness. There was not a sound of a single pair of boots against the walks. Suddenly he stepped back as he caught

the slow, slogging thumps of hoofs.

Three slickered riders passed, and a muffled voice complained: "Hell, that Ranger has holed up a long ways from here. I'm soaked to the hide."

The Ranger waited until the riders were swallowed up in the darkness far up the street where lights never burned, and then he ran cat-like up the walk with the battering of the rain absorbing the sounds he made. He came to the covered outside stairway running up the side of the big square building housing the Camino Real, and a figure seemed to rise right up out of the ground and challenge him. "Who is it? Dammit, speak up or—"

The Lone Wolf brought the butt of a sixgun down against the guard's head with a single wicked down-sweep of his arm, then stepped over the crumpled heap and made his way up the creaky stairs three steps at a time. He thought of the old padre and hoped the man had not stopped praying for him. He came to a door where thin cracks of light shone in the pitch dark, and leaned against it. He listened intently and caught a medley of voice, one higher-pitched and more edgy than the others.

Frank DeGoya walked up and down the big room, slamming a fist into the palm of his hand. He cursed the fear that would not leave him alone. He stopped in his tracks and glared at a slab-chested man slumped in one of his overstuffed chairs. "Hell, it was not possible!" he said for the second time. "His hands were tied for keeps, and it was only two miles to that haybarn. The man is only human, I tell you. He—"

"You'd damn well better believe us, Boss," said a little man with blond hair bleached nearly white. "You didn't see any fire, but we did see the bodies. Quarterone and Krebb and Ed Moss. Ollie must have cut and run." He got up from the table. "If it wasn't for that split you promised us, I'd be on my way now, too, DeGoya. I don't want to get within seeing distance of that Ranger!" He drew a trembling hand across his greasy, sweaty face. "Dammit, somebody get more whisky!"

"You've had enough!" DeGoya yelled. "Get out of here. Get your broncs and take a turn up and down the street. Tell the others to circle the town. Jump!"

The toughs left, sullen and muttering. DeGoya was left alone with his fears, his disbelief, and his black rage. In only a matter of a few hours, Fay Quarterone and Saul Krebb were dead. There wasn't a top gun left.

He paced the floor and stubbornly fought against the decision to gather up his immediate assets and move quickly out of the valley. But it meant the loss of his power, and an admission of guilt. Wasn't Tebo Mace dead? And Quarterone and Krebb? All his crimes could be pinned on the dead. What could Jim Hatfield prove if the man lived to get through to him? What man knew he had once answered to another name?

He came up short against the table, and an empty whisky bottle toppled and thumped to the thick carpet. A sound from across the room swung his eyes from side to side like a frightened cat's. The wind slammed at the windows, shouldered along the side of the building.

He shook his head savagely as if something had gotten into his eyes. There were twenty thousand head of cattle grazing out there in the hills. There was tribute due him from the shackers and the two-bit ranchers. He had an empire. Hell, he could buy all the lawyers and all the judges. He would send out the word and more gunman would drift toward San Rosa.

He made himself more conscious of his vast power, and his ego built a false and flimsy barrier against the last hour's deep unease. He took his coat of rich broadcloth that hung from the back of a chair and put it on. He straightened his tie, and replaced the rag of a cigar he had been chewing on with a fresh Havana.

He turned to leave the room when a terrific splintering crash made a greater sound than the storm outside. Frank DeGoya came back around and saw the back door to the room swinging from one hinge. He saw Jim Hatfield come in with a raw

gust of wind, and the Ranger's eyes were harder than the blue-black barrel of the Peacemaker he clutched in his right hand.

DeGoya tried to yell, but only a harsh sound came out of his throat.

"No gun, Robie?" Jim Hatfield taunted, making the name ring loud and clear, and saw its immediate and telling affect.

It hit DeGoya harder than any physical blow. The muscles of his hard, weathered face fell loose, and he braced himself against the side of his desk.

Jim Hatfield moved across the room, sifting the sounds swirling around outside for a sound of boots on the outside stairway. Frank DeGoya said, "Damn you, Hatfield. Damn your soul!" His breathing came in fearful gasps. "You can't kill me like this. It is murder."

A travesty of a smile twisted the Lone Wolf's mouth. "Your specialty, Robie. How did you know Sugden was shot in the back of the head. Why were you so sure they were a Ranger's bones? Everybody else seemed to be guessing! I'm going to tear your shirt from your back, Robie. If I have to kill you to do it." Jim Hatfield kept coming on.

THE man the valley knew as Frank DeGoya managed to cry out, but the sound fell far short of reaching down through the floor or through the storm's steady racket. Jim Hatfield stopped, drew his other Peacemaker and tossed it to the carpet at Harry Robie's feet.

"I'll wait until you've picked it up and have it in your hand, Robie," he said with grim finality. "It is ten times the chance you've ever given any other man. I promise you I won't kill you. I want a lot of people to see you hang."

"No, Ranger," Harry Robie protested. "No!" And suddenly the Lone Wolf saw the man's eyes betray a presence in the direction of the broken door, and he spun around and fired. A figure there tumbled back into the stairway, and Harry Robie lunged forward and grabbed up the Peacemaker Hatfield had thrown him. He was on one knee, ready to squeeze the trigger when the room seemed to explode. A searing hot pain ripped the length of his right arm and he let the sixgun drop to the carpet.

The Lone Wolf kicked the gun out of Robie's reach, then ran to the heavy door that led out to the balcony and pressed his shoulders hard against it. Reaching behind him, he turned the big key in the lock. He knew that the last few blasts of gunfire would bring the toughs in from the street. The windows would not matter, rain poured down the panes, and they were heavily curtained.

"You won't get out of this, Ranger!" Robie mocked, and yanked an antimacassar from the back of a chair and mopped up the blood running out of his arm. "I've got nearly a dozen men out there. Downstairs there's as many more."

Above the noise of the storm that was beginning to spend its fury, the Lone Wolf heard boots thud across the floor just outside the door. He jumped away from it, a second or two ahead of the thump of guns. Bullets skewered through and one struck a splinter from Robie's desk. The man screamed: "The lock, you fools!"

The Lone Wolf crashed two shots through the door, and heard a man's muffled scream of pain. A heavy body fell to the floor outside. Sensing rather than hearing movements out on the back stairway, the Lone Wolf emptied the Peacemaker of its last two shells into that dark rectangle just as two dark shapes moved out of it and into the lamplight. One fell without a sound, the other cursed painfully as he crawled back to the stairway, leaving his gun on the floor.

Harry Robie, cursing and yelling, made another try for the Peacemaker the Lone Wolf had kicked close to the opposite wall, and the Lone Wolf threw his empty gun and hit the man in the small of the back and wrung a cry of agony from his throat. Picking up the loaded Peacemaker, Hatfield heard the heavy smashing against the locked door. Its hinges began to give under the strain; he could see the screw-heads loosening. Bullets were chugging through, covering the men battering it down. He laid a shot at the door

from an angle, and heard the men scatter.

Getting painfully to his feet, Robie said, "You won't hold out much longer, Ranger. You'll never see the day you'll hang me!" He braced himself against the wall, his blood staining the expensive wall-paper.

The Lone Wolf dismally admitted to himself that the man might easily be right. All the toughs had to do was divert his attention to the outside stairway, while the men out on the balcony made another assault against the door. And one more would be enough.

The storm had swept beyond San Rosa and now the sounds from the street struck through the sides of the building. He heard the outside stairway creak and groan under the weight of more than one man, and Harry Robie laughed.

"Come and get him, men!" he called. "Smash down that door!"

The Lone Wolf suddenly heard a steadily building sound, the drumming of horses' hoofs. More of Robie's brush-jumpers? Wild yells and a burst of gunfire scattered his bleak conjecture. The toughs outside the door were running, their boots changing rhythm as they hit the stairs leading down into the Camino Real. San Rosa shook with a fury angrier than the recent storm, as the shooting continued.

The Lone Wolf ran to the window, swept the curtains aside, and looked out. There were two crumpled figures lying in the mud out there. Mounted men were riding up and down the street. Two sat their saddles in front of the stable, their rifles covering three men huddled against the side of the building.

The half-smashed door was shouldered open and three men charged into the room, guns filling their hands. Jim Hatfield holstered his Peacemaker and grinned. The man holding the carbine was Tom Jewell.

"Thought we'd make it too late, Ranger," the two-bit rancher said, and swept his glance around the room. Three other riders, clothes still soaked by the recent downpour, came in by the outside stairs.

"You had a busy time, Hatfield," one said, and stepped over a dead man. "How in the devil did you get into town?"

Jim Hatfield brushed a sleeve across his eyes and laughed. He stared at Harry Robie who was slumped down against the wall. Robie looked too small now for his clothes, as frightened and as miserable as he had a right to be.

"Father Alfredo," the Lone Wolf said, "had a spare cassock and an obliging donkey. The padre has been mighty unlucky for Harry Robie."

Jewell took a quick breath and held it. "You said 'Robie', Hatfield?"

The Lone Wolf nodded. The angry smokiness came into the jade green of his eyes. "Sure, he shot a Ranger in the back of the head up in Kelso Springs. He was part of a posse that chased outlaws out of the town. He took over thirty-thousand dollars that Sugden was bringing back with him. He bought an empire with it, Jewell. Get on your feet, Robie, and strip to the waist."

"Y-You can't prove it, Hatfield!" Robie said fearfully, his voice hardly more than a whisper.

THE Lone Wolf moved toward the cringing man, and Robie stripped off his coat and fancy white shirt as fast as his crippled arm would permit. It was Hatfield who practically ripped his undershirt from his back. The scars of old buckshot wounds were plain along Robie's ribs.

"A ladies' man at one time, I heard," the Lone Wolf said. "Like Tebo Mace. Brands that this curly wolf couldn't blot out. Can we hold him in this town's lock-up?"

"There's half a dozen farmers out there, Hatfield, and some other men I managed to round up," Tom Jewell said. "A couple of them had one time of it trying to stay in the saddle, but they could shoot." He looked at Robie hard, then back at the Lone Wolf. "Don't seem possible it took just one big man to clean up a mess like this and show how we could help ourselves by a little straight thinking and shooting."

"We got some help from a bigger one

than me," Jim Hatfield said. "When you get outside look up there at the mission. At the Cross. And if you want to do something that would please me, take some time off from raising beef and kind of fix the place up for the old padre. Dig him another well." He suddenly laughed deep in his throat. "And maybe buy him a fatter donkey."

Tom Jewel said, "It'll be done, Hatfield."

Harry Robie made the only plea he knew. Lifting himself up from a chair, the painful effort wringing sweat from his face, he said in hopeful desperation, clinging tenaciously to the belief that every man had his price, "I've got sixty thousand dollars in cash, and you can have half of it, Hatfield, if you'll turn me loose. Jewell, I'll cut you in on a fourth of my cattle. What do you men make in a year?"

"Take him out of here," the Ranger said, "before my stomach empties. Be sure the doctor patches him up!" He stared at the beaten and frightened Robie, shaking his head. "Look at the great man, Jewell. Look at what you've been afraid of."

He walked out of the room and down the stairs into the Camino Real. Jewell's ragtag army had taken it over. The barkeep and a tough in a gray shirt were dead on the floor. Percentage girls were huddled near a big gaming table, and they watched Jim Hatfield pass through, their eyes bright with a begrudging admiration for the man.

The man who had called himself Frank DeGoya, stumbling along between Tom Jewell and a dry farmer carrying a shotgun, kept fighting for his life. "I have a right to a deal if I tell you what you want to know. Prison, not the rope. They're m-my rights, Ranger. The law says—"

"You'll hang, Robie!" the Ranger said without turning his head, thinking of a bullet rolling around in a man's skull, and seeing once again what had been left of Tebo Mace.

When he got out to the walk and sucked the storm-washed night-air in deep, he looked up at the Mission San Gabriel, and then movements on the winding road leading down from it caught his eye. He waited, nodding acknowledgment to the thanks of grateful people who crowded around.

Nearly another half hour passed before Jim Hatfield walked to the mouth of the street to meet Father Alfredo who was leading the sorrel stud. "Padre," he said, "your prayers were strong. *Gracias.*"

"Perhaps not, Senor," the padre said, and turned Goldy's reins over to the Lone Wolf. "You are a man who does not need them very strong."

A shrill whistle came out from under his cowl, and soon the Ranger saw the donkey trot from the shadows at a surprisingly fast gait. There was a bond between Father Alfredo and the little animal that he could easily understand.

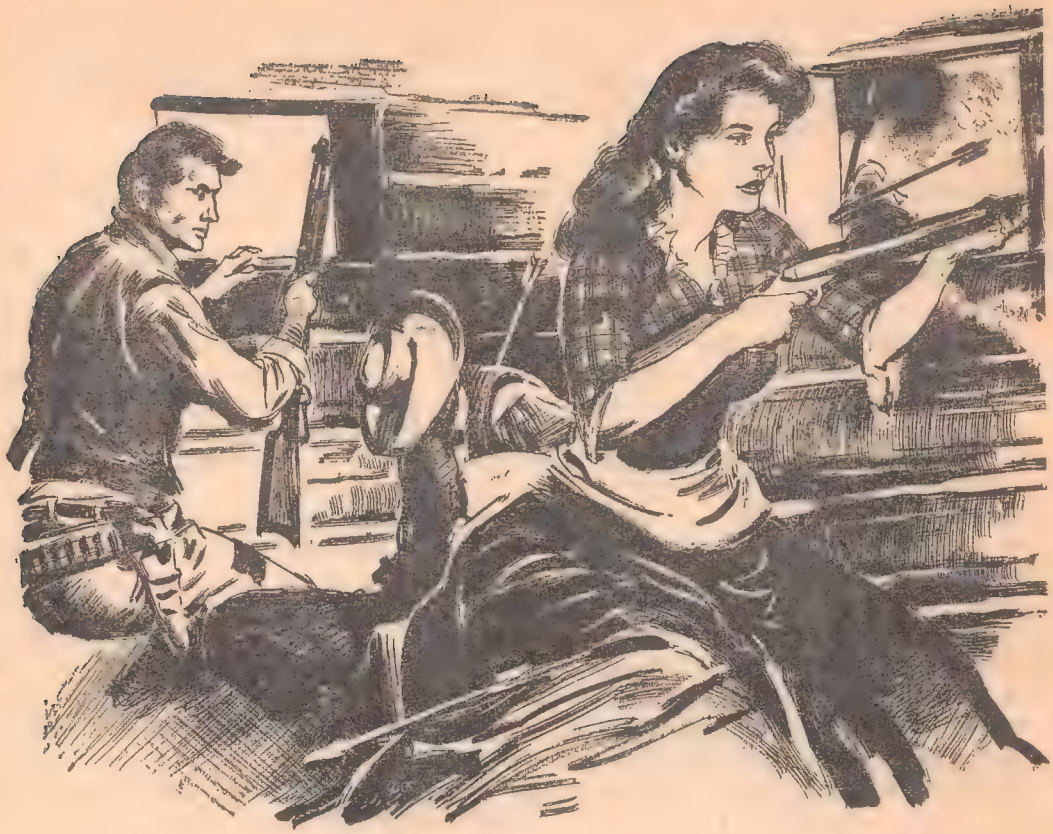
Jim Hatfield said, "The woman, Dona Maria, and the girl must leave here, Padre. No part of the evil must be left behind. Perhaps you know the whereabouts of the Ortegas and can bring them back."

"Si, Senor," Father Alfredo said. "All of this you tell me I will do." He looked toward the San Rosa lockup, and then back at the Lone Wolf again.

"I will be back in the morning to take him to Kelso Springs," Jim Hatfield said. "That's where I want him to hang, Padre." He looked up at the bright moon and then out toward the dark outlines of the distant hills. Only a few hours ago he had despaired of ever sleeping out under the stars again. He sensed the sorrel's anxiety to get away from the powder smell that still hung over San Rosa, and he quickly got into the saddle.

Father Alfredo lifted his hand. "Peace be with you, Senor Hatfield."

A small smile flickered across the Lone Wolf's face as he rode out of the town. While he wore the badge of the Rangers and the big sixguns in his holsters, he could never hope to fulfill even a padre's wish, and was far from being dead certain that he wanted to. Out on the flats he felt Goldy straining at the bit, and he gave the sorrel its head and let Goldy run.



TRIP TO DRAGOON SPRINGS

By

PHILIP MORGAN

They were, Tracy thought, a motley crew—the woman the best Apache fighter of them all

TRACY BURKE sat with his back against the inside wall of the old stage station, his long legs stuck straight out ahead of him. His mind was closed against the brutal Arizona heat. Across the big room from him, Karl Heinman sat, his heavy head tipped over on one side, his mouth open wide. Heinman was asleep and snoring, oblivious of the flies that walked across his face. Heinman's hands were in his lap, the handcuffs holding his wrists tightly together.

With cynical amusement, Tracy realized that of all of them here, Heinman was the least worried. Heinman had nothing to lose, because when he reached Tucson, he would get a quick trial and a quicker hanging. But the rest of them were probably going to die as quickly as Heinman.

They had come from Mesilla, five passengers thrown together for the trip to Tucson. Cattleman, Charley Yates, from

the Tonto country up north, was a square-shaped man and a man of power in Arizona. The tall, thin man gave his name as Barnes and nothing else. Tracy thought he might be a gambler. Although he wore cow country clothes, his hands were not the hands of a man who ever handled a rope. Then the woman, small and quite pretty, who was on her way to her aunt's in Tucson. She was from Illinois and she didn't seem to understand just how serious their predicament was.

Those three, Tracy thought, and a deputy sheriff with his prisoner. The prisoner a man who had murdered time after time in the Territory and gotten away. This last time he had killed a man and his wife and child. And this last time he had run, but the rangers caught him in El Paso and held him.

It was strange, sitting here thinking about the Apaches lying out there waiting so patiently. It took him back ten years, back to the time of Cochise, when Tucson was a beleagured huddle of mud buildings on the banks of the Santa Cruz. They had grown careless in the years of comparative peace since Cochise had accepted General Howard's truce.

Geronimo made his sporadic raids, but it was hard for a man who had lived through those other terrible years to take him seriously. In Cochise's time, there would have been no stage to Tucson. And if one had tried to get through, the driver would never have driven so close to a dry arroyo, close enough to be picked off by the Apaches first volley. But they had gotten careless and the trails through this land were thick with the bones of the careless. Tracy had taken over the coach and brought them in here to temporary shelter. Now they waited, each in his own way.

The woman was sitting near Tracy and she looked at him now and asked, "Have they gone away?"

He shook his head and said bluntly, "No, they haven't gone away. They won't until we're all dead."

She turned white at his words and he regretted saying it, but only for a moment. He didn't want to be kind to her or get emotional about her. He didn't want to have any feeling about her one way or another.

Charley Yates heard the exchange and hit out at Tracy. "You could be a little kinder." He looked across at the woman, who was no more than twenty-five, and smiled. "The cavalry will hear the shootin', Miss. They'll come on the jump."

Barnes, guarding the other window, spoke with a voice tinged with panic. "I thought this trip was safe. They told me in St. Louis the Indian trouble was over."

Yates shrugged, "Geronimo's band makes raids once in awhile. We were just unlucky."

"They shouldn't have said it was safe then," Barnes replied.

"Maybe you can get your money back," Tracy said drily. He had seen more Indian fighting than any of them and he got up now and moved up beside Yates and searched the country he could see from that window. He saw nothing. Crossing the room, he stood beside Barnes, looked and again saw nothing. Yates was watching him. Tracy shook his head.

"Well, what do you think?" Barnes said loudly.

Tracy looked squarely at him and replied flatly, "I think we're safe until morning. They'll hit us just before sunrise."

"Isn't there anything we can do," Barnes cried. The fear in him was a tangible thing, sickening to see.

"We can wait," Tracy said coldly, "and when they come, we can fight."

Heinman's thickly accented voice broke in now, "So maybe I don't hang after all." He chuckled. "You sure been countin' on watchin' me swing, ain't you, Burke."

"I sure have," Tracy said. "I was figuring I'd slap the horse out from under you, Heinman. I wanted to see you kick. I still do."

Helen Parsons gasped at Tracy's words and looked at him as if he was something that had just crawled out from under a rock. It made Tracy uncomfortable, but his expression, so trained to taciturnity, did not change.

She said, "What kind of a man are you? He's a human being."

Tracy was crouched against the wall and he looked across at Heinman with eyes that glittered brightly. "No, ma'am, he's no human being. He heard that a family by the name of Anderson had made a pile of gold and had it in their store. He broke in and murdered them in their sleep. They were maybe your age and they had a little boy just three years old. There wasn't any gold—it was just a rumor."

An expression of horror crossed her face and looking at her now, Tracy thought she was going to be sick. But she recovered and said nothing and he admired her for that.

"There must have been about twenty of them, Tracy. What did you get?" Charley Yates said.

"Twenty-one and you got two on the way in."

"Been a long time since I've seen any Indian trouble," Yates said. "Were they Chiricahuas?"

"No, we were lucky there. Mostly Mimbrenos and a few Coyoteros. I figure we've got a chance with three of us working the Winchesters. They have to come to us."

Looking at the girl, Yates said, "Sure, we've got a good chance," but Tracy didn't think she was fooled. Across the room, Heinman grinned sardonically.

THE hot afternoon passed slowly with the cattleman and Barnes standing guard. There was nothing to eat. Dusk came and then full darkness fell. They closed the shuttered windows and barred the doors. Tracy told Barnes and Yates to rest and took over the guard. The moon came up and the earth looked strange in its white light.

Outside the Apaches began to call back and forth with the shrill yips of coyotes. Inside, Tracy watched from a loophole in one of the windows and once saw a shadow rise from the ground and move and he fired on it and heard a yell of pain. After that, he saw no more movement.

Charley Yates sat next to the girl and talked to her, telling her about his ranch and the beautiful country there. He was fifteen years older than she, but this country was short of eligible women and a man couldn't afford to pass up a chance. She was polite to him, but there was a coolness about her, a reserve that Tracy noticed and wondered about.

Finally Yates gave it up and stretched out and was soon asleep. Barnes was lying on the other side of the room, not far from Heinman and his eyes glittered in the faint light of the room. But the day had been exhausting and he finally slept in spite of his fear. Heinman was again sleeping.

The girl rose and joined Tracy at the window. He could smell the freshness of her, and he could see only the kindest picture of her face, all lines gone and small pockets of shadow giving it a tantalyzing, mysterious quality. He felt anger brush across his mind then, anger at the futility of this whole thing. For most of them it wasn't too bad, since they had always lived here and had accepted the risks inherent in living in this violent land. Barnes had not, but Barnes was a weakling and didn't count.

Tracy saw the rise and fall of the girl's breasts under the tight-fitting bodice of her dress and knew from the quick way she breathed that she was afraid, but she did not show that fear to anyone. He realized then that he had come to like her, without intending to, without wanting to. After the death of the Andersons, he had sworn he would never again let his emotions become involved in his relationships with the people he knew. Out here it always ended the same way.

But a man could control his feelings, Tracy knew now. He felt compassion for her. He wanted to change the bad impression he had made.

"Nothing's as quiet as the desert when Apaches are around," he said.

"It's beautiful in a stark way," she replied. "Do you ever get used to the desolation."

"In the spring, everything flowers and it's really beautiful. You come out here and you hate it and swear you always will.

And then one day you leave and you aren't happy until you get back."

She said quietly, "I can't believe I could ever like it."

"Where did you come from?"

"Southern Illinois. It's pretty there, with so many trees. It isn't wild."

He laughed a little then, the first time she had heard him. "Sure, but something made you come out here. You're just like the rest of us. It was a nice country, but it was too tame. I came from New York state, but I won't ever go back."

She looked quickly at him and then said, "You see things. I did come out here looking for a change—adventure. I was tired of the same men courting me, of doing the same dull things and hearing the same dull talk. I felt like I was trapped. So when Aunt Bess wrote and asked me to visit her, I came. But I didn't expect this much excitement." She said it lightly, but she couldn't hide the fact that she was terribly frightened.

On impulse, then, he reached out and squeezed her shoulder. "It will be all right. We're under cover and we have a lot of fire power with these repeaters. They don't like losing a lot of men."

"Are you saying that just to make me feel better?" she asked softly, but added quickly, "Don't answer that. Thank you for it, either way."

"I want you to stand by Barnes when the attack comes. I'll give you the driver's shotgun. You won't need to use it unless he folds up." He got the gun and brought it over and showed her how to cock and aim it. He cautioned her about pulling the rear trigger first and all the time he was wondering if she could do it. He had the feeling that Barnes wasn't going to be any help and they had to be covered on that side He could cover one side and Yates another and the west side had no openings. But if Barnes caved in, they were dead unless the girl could take over.

She listened attentively to his instructions, her face pinched and her lips tightly compressed. When he had finished, she said, "I'm not sure that I could kill anyone."

He looked squarely at her and told her flatly, "You'll have to. If you don't, they'll kill all of us." He let the silence drag on for a minute, letting his words sink in. Then he added, "Barnes may make it. If he does, you won't have to use the gun."

SHE leaned against the wall beside him, needing the support and asked, "What brought you out here?" and he realized she also needed the support of speaking about ordinary things.

"The same as you. Excitement maybe and the chance to get ahead. Most of the opportunities were gone back home. There is always more chance for a man in a new land."

"What chances are there here?" It seems like such a desolate place."

He smiled. "It always does when you first see it. But anywhere you can put water on the land, it produces good crops. A man could have a place and raise some cattle and do a little farming. You can have your pick of the land. Now is the time, because once the Indians are whipped, the people will be coming."

She thought about it for awhile, but she didn't say anything. They stood there, close together, drawing comfort from each others presence. The night passed slowly. He let the others sleep, because he had to watch Heinman and because he trusted no one else in this.

She waited with him, unable to sleep probably. But also he thought that she understood that he was taking the responsibility of directing their fight for survival and she did not want him to bear it alone. All men know fear and loneliness in the dark hours of night and women seem always to understand. She was a great comfort to him and he thought how good it would be to always have her with him. He had dreams, but they meant little when there was no one to share them with.

A half hour before dawn, when the world was still black, he woke the others. Yates came awake at once and rose and moved to his position without any comment. Barnes woke with a jerk and looked wildly about him for a moment, not recall-

ing where he was. When he did, the fear came back to him. His features were indistinct in the poor light, but Tracy could smell the fear in him. Barnes got up and went to the window with his rifle. Without comment, Helen joined Barnes, the shotgun gripped tightly in her hands.

Tracy said, "First light will be here soon. They'll be coming then. Wait until you have a sure target and then aim low and let fly." He said this for the benefit of Barnes, because Charley Yates had been through this before.

Heinman's voice hit out at Tracy then. "You better take these shackles off me and let me use one of them guns, Burke." Silence fell then, thick and heavy. Tracy could almost hear the others listening for his decision.

"So you could throw down on all of us when the attack was over," tracy said easily. "No thanks, Heinman. I'd rather take a chance with an Apache than you." He heard their released breaths before Heinman began to curse him in a flat monotonous voice. He used some ugly oaths and Tracy ordered him harshly, "Shut up, or I'll put a bullet in your knee." Heinman fell silent at once, never once doubting that Tracy would do as he said.

The first gray light filtered across the land and Tracy watched the land with an eye-aching attention. Suddenly there were shadows moving out there. At first he thought it was a trick his eyes were playing on him, but then he knew.

He said, struggling to keep his voice unemotional, "They're coming."

The Apaches came in fast, running, their moccasins making no noise. Tracy put his sights on a brave and when he had him squarely lined up, he squeezed off a shot and the brave went down. That broke it open. The Apaches screamed shrilly then, wanting to shock them, hoping to make them miss.

The other guns joined in and Tracy listened to them even as he picked out targets and sighted and fired and picked another Apache target. He heard both Winchesters firing for a moment and then there was only one, but he could not look around. In another second, he heard the boom of the shotgun and silently blessed the girl.

It didn't last long. Tracy killed four men and the rest broke and faded back and blended against the earth. He turned to see where he was most needed and was in time to see Charley Yates take two short steps backward and sit down heavily. There was a long feathered shaft sticking out of Yates chest and the head of the arrow protruded from his back. Yates sat up a moment and fell over on his side dead.

Tracy ran across to that window and killed a brave ten feet out. He fired again and missed and the four or five remaining Apaches turned and ran. Tracy cut across the room and joined the girl. She was white-faced and looked about ready to collapse, but she was watching out the window and she had the shotgun loaded and cocked. Looking out the window, Tracy saw three dead Apaches lying there, the nearest one only a few yards from the building.

"They broke and ran, Tracy," she said. "May I sit down?"

He took her gun from her and leaned it against the wall. Then he took her by the shoulders and gently lowered her to a sitting position. And right then he knew that Heinman was gone. It hit him like a blow, shocking him, raising the hackles on his neck. He looked quickly where Heinman had been and there was no-one there. He looked at Barnes. Barnes was huddled against the wall, where he had fled in his panic, but there was something in the still way Barnes sat there.

Going to him, Tracy touched him and Barnes fell over slowly. Kneeling down, Tracy saw the marks of the chain on Barnes neck. The story was clear enough then.

Heinman had slipped up on Barnes and strangled him with the chain between the handcuffs. Barnes rifle was gone and so was the only canteen. He went to the door and found it standing half ajar and saw Heinman's tracks leading away. Heinman had chanced the Apaches.

THE girl was watching him, so before he turned, he composed his features. Then he went back to her and sat down beside her, weariness pulling at all the muscles of his body. He smiled at her.

"Well, we did it."

She studied his face and he knew he hadn't fooled her. "Your prisoner escaped, didn't he?"

He nodded. "He killed Barnes and got away with his gun."

"Why didn't he shoot you when he had the chance?"

"He needed us here to fight off the Apaches. He was afraid if he shot me, they'd overrun the place and get him too. When he pulled out, he left the door open, figuring they would find it and get us."

She shuddered slightly. "I almost hope the Apaches killed him."

"How are you feeling?" he asked her, needing to know before he told her about the water.

"I'm all right now. Can we go on to Tucson?" He got to his feet and stood before her, his tough face settled into a strict gravity.

"It's almost twenty miles to Dragoon Springs. It's mostly level walking, but we can't make it without water and Heinman took the water. I've got to go get him and bring back that canteen."

He saw the fear leap alive in her eyes. She rose stiffly and stood there, her hands clenched at her sides and her lips trembling. "I don't think I can take any more, Tracy. I don't think I can stay here alone."

He reached out and took her shoulders and pulled her gently against him. He put his arms around her and held her and when she turned her face up to him he kissed her without heat.

"You have to wait, Helen. I'll be back and it's our only chance. The Apaches killed all the horses and we can't walk that far without water."

She bit her lip and from somewhere deep inside her she drew strength. She pulled back from him. "I'll wait. But what about the Apaches? Aren't they still out there?"

"I think they pulled out. They tried us and they got hurt and I don't think they'll want any more of it. They lost twelve men getting two of us. Anyway, I'll have to try it. When I go out, you bar the door. Keep the shotgun handy. If I don't come back, stay here. You wouldn't have a chance alone on the desert. Someone may pass here."

She said, "All right," in a dead sounding voice.

He smiled at her. "It isn't all bad. They'll probably send a cavalry detail out to look for the stage when it doesn't show up."

Tracy went out and looked around. He walked out openly, knowing that if the Apaches were here they would get him. But he found the arroyo where they had held their ponies and a plain trail leading away to the south. Relief hit him hard enough that he had to stop for a minute. Then he returned to the station and read the story of Heinman's flight in the sand.

Heinman had crawled from the station to the old adobe stables along a short wall that ran between the two structures. Once in the stables, he had waited until the fight was going hottest and then made a run for the cover of the mesquite. He had crawled two hundred yards through the brush until he was out of sight of the station and then he had risen and set off. He'd probably known where to find water.

Tracy returned to the station and told Helen what he had found. He took the bodies of Yates and Barnes out to the stables and returned again to the girl. He stood looking at her a minute, thinking what a short time he had known her and yet how much he loved her. She seemed to read his thoughts, because her eyes softened and her expression grew tender. She came to him and put her arms around him and kissed him on the lips.

When she stepped back, she was softly smiling. "Good luck, Tracy."

"So long," he told her and went out.

He waited until he heard the bar on the door drop and then he walked swiftly away, along Heinman's trail which was plain and easy to follow. And now, hunting the man, he remembered the Ander-

sons and the old rage rose and choked him. He thought of killing Heinman, relished the thought for a moment and then he no longer felt any elation. Heinman had to be killed, because he was a mad dog, but Tracy found now that he was going to get no pleasure from it.

The Andersons were dead and killing Heinman slowly and with pleasure would not bring them back. It had been a fool's wish, his desire to see the man hang, to torture him. With that knowledge, the rage left him and killing Heinman became a necessary chore and nothing more. All that really mattered now was getting the canteen and taking the girl safely into Tucson.

Tracy gained on Heinman. He had possession of one fact of which the killer was unaware. Heinman did not know that the Apaches had pulled out and therefore he was traveling slowly and staying under close cover. Heinman had no desire to be caught by the Indians. They knew him for a bounty hunter who had collected money from the Mexican government for Apache scalps. The tortures they would devise for him would be exquisite.

WITHIN two miles of the station, Tracy caught sight of the big German ahead. Heinman was working from patch to patch in the mesquite, never in the open long enough to give Tracy a good shot at him. Tracy moved in on him at a trot, hoping to get close enough for a sure shot at the killer before Heinman knew he was around. He moved when Heinman moved and hid when the German hid.

Tracy closed the gap. He was near enough, he thought, to risk a shot the next time Heinman broke cover for any distance. But in the next short dash, Heinman looked back and saw Tracy. Even at a distance of two hundred yards, Tracy could see the look of anger, fear and confusion that twisted Heinman's features. Heinman dodged into the nearest clump of mesquite and Tracy also dove for cover.

After that it became a deadly cat and mouse affair. Tracy searched Heinman's position with a pair of bullets that were answered. He moved forward to the edge of the mesquite and studied Heinman's position and saw that the German could not get out. He was in a patch of brush perhaps twenty yards around, but that lone patch was separated from any other cover by a distance of fifty yards. Heinman couldn't come out, but he could wait. He had the water.

Backing up, Tracy started searching. He crawled, hiding behind patches of brush, at right angles to the killer for a distance of more than three hundred yards. He found a small arroyo here and was able to move at a crouching run. The arroyo cut slowly in the direction of Heinman's hideout. Later on, Tracy left the arroyo and taking advantage of the folds in the earth wormed his way onward. When he finally stopped, he was behind the killer and some hundred yards out.

When he had his wind back, Tracy began the most dangerous part of this stalk. He moved straight in on Heinman's position and now there was little cover. He moved from bush to bush and from bush to small depression and from depression to rock. All the time, he expected to feel the smash of a rifle bullet advising him with unquestioning finality that he had lost. It did not come.

At ten yards, Tracy rose and brought up his rifle, able now to make out the crouching form of Heinman in the mesquite. He sighted on the broad back and his finger started to tighten on the trigger and then he knew he couldn't do it like this.

He said, "Turn around, Heinman," and saw that huge form jerk sideways and turn. He saw Heinman's face very clearly in the second before he fired and all there was in that face was hatred.

Heinman snatched the rifle up and fired with amazing speed, but the shot slammed into the ground. Tracy fired once and saw the dust jump from the front of Heinman's shirt. The German coughed very loudly and then blood was running from his mouth and he fell forward on his face and did not move. Moving very carefully, Tracy went up to him and turned him over

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Clint drew and fired in one motion, and knew then how fast he really was

Boomerang

By JOE ARCHIBALD

The change in Clint Britten, the gunman, was due to many things

—to an unbalanced boy and a heartless man, and to pretty Lucy

CLINT BRITTEN stepped up to the planked walk in front of Rolling's hardware store in the town of Maverick Springs, stopped suddenly to watch a boy with shaggy hair and lack-lustre eyes sitting on the walk's edge. The boy had a handful of sand and was letting it trickle through a crack in the boards.

Clint had seen the boy perform this ritual many times before, but he never failed to feel a shiver trace down the length of his spine. Only a couple of days ago he had come upon Johnny Sabin over a mile from town, squatted down on the rimrock, and Johnny was filling, with infinite patience, a wide crack in the rock with gravel.

Johnny's eyes lifted and he met Clint's glance. Just the shadow of a smile brushed across his mouth that could never quite close over his big teeth. He looked at all men this way, good or bad, and people said he lacked the intelli-

gence to judge one from the other.

Clint, a man who could be placed in both categories, and who would be the first to admit it, said, "Mister Drummond in his office, Johnny?"

"Yuh," Johnny said, let the last few grains of sand drop into the crack, and wiped his hand across the front of his dirty washed-out blue shirt. He got up and moved up the walk, ungainly, like a bear cub.

Clint Britten walked up an outside stairway to the office on the second floor. A big sign at one corner of the false front said: SEE ANSE DRUMMOND FOR LAND. Bought or Sold. Clint stood looking at the man's door for a moment or two before turning the brass knob. He was aware of a kind of guilty feeling that had begun to bother him the last few weeks. A question had always accompanied this inner disturbance. Where did gratitude end?

Clint Britten was only twenty-two years old and there was a toughness about him, on the surface and beneath it that belonged to a man who had lived at least ten more years. His hands were quick, and long and slender. He wore his sixgun low, and tied down, and there was the mark of the professional in his restless smokey-blue eyes, and around his long mouth. It occurred to him that he had a lot in common with Johnny Sabin for both of them had been beholden to Drummond as far back as they could remember, but for reasons worlds apart. That is, Drummond had always maintained they were.

Clint walked into the office and shut the door behind him. Drummond looked up from his desk, a heavy-set fattening man with thinning and graying coal-black hair. One side of his loose-lipped mouth had been pulled out of shape and stained yellow by his ever present black cigar. His eyes were small, his nose too large.

Drummond said, "About time you got here, Cint. Why aren't the Rodmans off that land? I told you to drive them out yesterday."

"Look, Anse," Clint said. "They were cheated when you sold it to them. You knew that the creek dried up come early summer. Sure, it was full in March when you sold, but it's not now."

Drummond chewed furiously on his cigar and lifted himself out of his big chair. "What's got into you, Clint? Blast it, you knew it, too. Is it that Rodman girl that's turned you soft? Look, I raised you from a homeless pup, and made a man out of you. I taught you how to use that gun you wear, and made you taller and tougher than any other man in this basin. You'll go out there before noon and order them off that land. They had an agreement to work it on shares. They haven't produced. Now get out of here! Use the gun if they make any resistance."

Clint knew right then, as he failed to marshal enough nerve to stand against Drummond, that a man can become a creature of habit the same as a dog, especially one that had been picked up and fed and made warm when they had been too small to shift for themselves. And he admitted right then and there that he had never felt a modicum of rebellion against Drummond and his ruthless operations until he had met Lucy Rodman.

Habit forced him to say, "All right, Anse, all right," and habit sent him out of the office like a dog that had been cuffed. Sure, he could shoot Lucy's father and the law would leave him alone, because Anse owned the sheriff, too.

He met Johnny Sabin on his way to the Last Mile saloon. The boy was on the half run, and Clint knew he was heading for Drummond's office. Drummond let the boy sleep in a dirty back room of the Last Mile, an establishment he had taken over soon after he had come to Maverick Springs, and in return the boy kept his office scrubbed.

Clint wondered if he was more to be pitied than Johnny. The boy had not scared people out of the basin with a sixgun, and hadn't beaten anybody with his little fists. People did not look at Johnny as if he had been a dangerous animal and they did not draw away when he passed them by.

Clint went into the Last Mile and asked for a beer, and three punchers from the Y Bench outfit eyed him warily and then picked up their drinks and moved to a table far across the room. A big man came in, nodded stiffly to Clint, and pressed against the bar. He wore a townsman's expensive clothes. He had set up a law office in town not too long ago, and his name was George Levering.

He said to the barkeep, "That boy, Johnny. Just saw him a minute ago. Seems like he should have a chance to be like a normal human being. Maybe doctors somewhere—"

"Anse Drummond's his guardian," the barkeep said. "He'd never hear of it. Wouldn't spend that kind of money on a kid."

Levering said, "He's one of nature's children, my friend. Nature, I heard somewhere, hates a vacuum, an emptiness. So does Johnny Sabin. He fills them up."

Clint Britten felt the heat of anger build up inside him. Maybe they had not told this lawyer why Johnny acted the way he did. Johnny had been just like any other healthy kid before that night when the shackers were burned out by half a dozen toughs hired by Anse Drummond, and he would have been one of them, at the age of eighteen, if he hadn't had an attack of stomach cramps that put him in bed.

One of the riders had gunned Johnny's father down, and a rifle stock had nearly killed Johnny. It had been his bad luck to recover physically. Mentally, well, like the lawyer said, he was now one of Nature's children. Drummond had resold the land to other nesters, who in turn had been driven away.

CLINT drained his glass and hurried out of the Last Mile. In a few minutes he had the town well behind him and was following a short cut to the Rodman farm. The narrow road took him across Little Mogul river, through the floor of a wide canyon, and up to a scrub-tufted ridge that looked down at the shackers' grubby fields.

Smoke curled up from the chimney of an old clapboard house, sorely in need of paint and repair. There was a barn with a sagging roof, and an old windmill. Near the barn was a flower garden and there was movement there, and he was sure it was Lucy Rodman. She was partial to white dresses with polka dots, and that little garden that brought her the only happiness she had ever known.

He had his decision to make. He could swing his claybank away from there and ride until the next sundown and be far away from Anse Drummond, or he could switch his allegiance to the Rodmans and all those other people in the basin who would ultimately suffer as the man's power grew. This would mean that Drummond would bring Evers Chavee and Pat Nimbro, two slick gunslingers, and some some of his other toughs in and kill Clint Britten. The rebellion would die as quick as it was born and people would die. Drummond had inferred not too long ago that Chavee and Nimbro were his insurance against Clint ever getting any wrong ideas.

An idea came to Clint and he let it grow in his mind as he rode down into the Rodman yard. Lucy came out of the garden, carrying a bunch of white roses, and when she saw him, the healthy tan of summer almost gone seemed to drop away from her face and give it no more color than the flowers she carried. The fear in her dark eyes sickened him, and he felt unclean.

She brushed rich-brown windblown hair out of her eyes and called, "Father!" and then walked toward Drummond's trouble-shooter, her mouth stiffening with anger and defiance. "No, we didn't pack and run, Britten!" she said, and he caught a break in her voice. "All right, pull your hired gun and shoot us all. Set fire to the buildings. It's the land that has the value."

"It's not my doing, Miss Rodman," Clint said desperately. He saw Will Rodman coming out of the barn, a pitchfork in his hand.

The door of the house opened and

Lucy's mother called out, "What is it, Lucy?"

Will Rodman yelled at his wife, "Stay inside, Kate," and advanced on Clint. "We won't run like whipped dogs, Britten. You'll have to drive us out, and I'll try and get a piece of you before you drop me."

The door of the house slammed shut. A few moments later it opened again and Kate Rodman came out into the yard, a shotgun in her hands.

Clint held up his hand, yelled, "Wait!" and quickly got out of the saddle. He faced Rodman and hurried his words.

"There is nothing personal in this," Clint said. "I have a job to do. If it isn't me, it'll be Sheriff DeLong. Drummond has a legal claim, and the fact that he put one over on you when he sold you this farm won't interest the law. You owe him money, Rodman."

"Get off this yard, gunman!" Will Rodman yelled. "I said he'll have to drive us out. I got cheated!"

"Why don't you shoot, Britten?" Lucy taunted. "Don't tell us that there is a pill-sized lump of softness in you? Not in the man who nearly crippled Nick Yuvac with a bullet."

"It was Yuvac or me, Miss Rodman," Clint said. "I've never killed a man. Rodman, how much do you owe Drummond?"

"A hundred and eighty dollars, Britten. It might as well be that many thousand. Make your move, Britten."

Clint looked at Lucy Rodman, and saw the scorn that was in her eyes, and now he knew how much he hated Anse Drummond. It was as clear in his mind as the bright sun burning overhead that he would have to kill the man to break the insufferable bonds that held him. He dropped his glance to the girl's lips and saw them tremble, and he knew she was close to crying. Hate never brought tears, he told himself as he quickly walked to the claybank and swung to his saddle. He felt like a man who had been groping through a hopeless dark and had suddenly seen a pinpoint of light.

"You don't have to go, Rodman," he called to the nester. "I'll see to that."

Clint went to the bank when he got back to town. He drew out a lump of the money he had saved, and it seemed to have a smell that twisted his nostrils. Commissions for the dirty work he had done for Drummond. He walked directly to Drummond's office and handed the man one hundred and eighty dollars.

"He squared up, Anse," he said. "The shacker must have friends."

Drummond crushed the bills in a big freckled fist and slammed them to his desk. "Who the hell's backing a crumby shacker like Rodman, Clint? The Y Bench? Ackerman'll be damned sorry he threw in with the sodbusters!" His little porcine eyes suddenly narrowed and he leaned across the desk. "This wouldn't have anything to do with you gettin' moon-eyed over Rodman's daughter, would it, Clint? If I ever found out it did, you wouldn't get to run far! Well, we'll run the Rodmans out in my own good time. I'll find a reason, Clint."

Clint had to fight the urge to leap over the desk and smash Drummond's face with his fists. He was certain the man had a sixgun in that top drawer, but Drummond would never get a chance to get his hands on it. Lest the man see the hate he had for him, he turned abruptly and walked out of the office.

Johnny Sabin sat at the foot of the wooden stairway and he was filling in a trench gutted out by a recent rain with dried mud and tamping it down with his foot.

"How are you Johnny?" Clint asked.

"Good. Good," the boy said, and lifted his listless eyes to Drummond's man.

Clint felt his stomach knot up. He wished he was a smart doctor who could fill that vacancy inside Johnny's head. His throat became dry and he hurried toward the Last Mile. Sounds of trouble struck against him as he walked inside. Sheriff Earl DeLong, a thin and indolent man, was having words with Al Akerman, owner of the Y Bench. Three of Akerman's punchers were there, standing in their dust and sweat.

"You'd better have more proof, Akerman," DeLong said warningly. "You're missing some cattle and that's all you can tell me."

"There's a bunch of cow thieves working out of the potholes, DeLong," Akerman bellowed. "Somebody around here is the brains behind it, and they work too slick to make it a hit and miss proposition."

DeLong said to the barkeep, "Bourbon, Ed." He turned back to Akerman. "Bring me a man with the smell of a fire on him, and a running iron in his hand, Al. Then I'll look into it." The sheriff turned his attention to Clint. "The Rodmans packing?"

Clint shook his head. "They paid up."

DeLong sucked in his breath. "Where would that shacker get that much cash together in such a short time?" He suddenly swung toward Akerman. "Nesters can ride horses, Al. They could steal stock and know where to hide it."

AKERMAN looked half-convinced, and Clint hurried out of the Last Mile, convinced that Anse Drummond was not going to be satisfied with grabbing up the land. He was employing the oldest and most sure-fire method of power-grabbing known to man. Turn one man against another. Plant the seed of suspicion here, the sperm of distrust there, and most important of all, turn the cattlemen against the nesters and start violence that would bring the wild bunch in.

Clint went over to the hotel and had a hot bath, then stretched out on his bed for awhile. He fell asleep, and later, when he awoke, the bloody reflection of the setting sun was coloring the panes of the window. He was pulling on his boots when he heard the faint knock on his door.

"Come in," he said loudly, and Johnny Sabin entered.

"He say to come see him, Mr. Drummond."

The boy sat down in a chair close to the wall, and as Clint delayed to yawn the sleepiness out of him he watched Johnny lean forward and poke at a crack in the floor with a long forefinger. He shivered, and hurriedly buckled his gunbelt around him and tied the holster down.

Johnny trailed him down the street. The traffic in the street was getting heavier, and the walks drummed to the sound of many boots. He caught scraps of conversation and they told him that feeling was being fomented against the farmers. Crossing the street, he glanced over his shoulder and saw that Johnny had stopped in the middle of the street and was picking up a chunk of half-dried mud. Two horsemen had to swerve their broncs in a hurry to keep from running over him.

"Come here, you little whack-ear," Clint yelled, and Johnny stumbled toward the walk, plunging one hand into the pocket of his ragged coat.

Clint walked up to Drummond's office, leaving Johnny sitting on the wooden steps. He found the land shark pacing the floor, the man's face as poisonous as the cigar smoke that filled the room.

Drummond stopped and said, "I've been asking around. I've talked with Akerman. The rancher swears he never loaned the Rodmans any money. I went to the bank. You drew money out, Clint!"

Drummond's eyes were streaked with distrust.

"I often do," Clint said. "There's a game on tonight, Anse."

"I've got a job for you, and I want it done tonight, Clint. You'll meet Chavee and Nimbro out in the potholes at midnight. They might need your help with a bunch of stock." He paused, lighted a dead cigar, and grinned at Clint. "Sure, we're going in for cattle. We're going to be big, Clint. We aim to take the Y Bench. After you're through out there, you'll take four hides and bury them close to Rodman's barn. It'll give us the excuse to wipe that bunch out."

Clint said, "It could be moving a little too fast, Anse," and knew somehow that Drummond no longer fully trusted him.

He no longer had the slightest doubt when the man said, "Oh, by the way, Clint, you'll take orders from Chavee. He's an older and wiser head, and tougher than

you. That clear?"

"It is," he said, and quickly left the office. Drummond called after him, "I'll be at my office when you get back, Clint. No matter how late."

There was some fear in him as he walked up the street for he was much younger than Drummonds other gunslingers. He'd heard people say that he was mighty fast with a Colt, but he had never proven it against such men as Chavee and Nimbro. He was passing a dry goods store when a woman's voice slowed his step.

"Britten, wait," it said, and he turned his head slightly and saw Lucy Rodman coming toward him. She wore a town dress that rustled as she moved, and a bonnet-like hat with a ribbon that held it firm under her chin. He looked for a sign of friendliness in her face and found none. He tipped his hat.

"It is being told around that the Rodmans paid their debts," Lucy said. "It is a lie, Britten, and it is in our minds that you paid Drummond. We do not accept charity, especially from gunfighters. I am going directly to Anse Drummond and—"

He suddenly took her by the arm, and he said fiercely, his voice a hoarse whisper, "Don't be a fool, Ma'am. You would be trading your pride for your father's life. And I'm a dead man, too, if—" He took his hand from her and grinned dismally. "Of course, that would not concern you. It's a loan, Miss Rodman. I'll expect payment."

She studied him closely, and a deep interest and curiosity replaced the storm in her dark eyes. "I would be grateful, Mister Britten," she said, "if you would walk me to my rig."

"A pleasure," Clint said, and they walked up the street slowly. The woman broke the uncomfortable silence. "You know what Drummond is. Yet you work for him. Why?"

"Call it a debt, Ma'am," he said wearily. "One that you can't settle as easy as a grocery bill. Until a few months back I was satisfied with what he made out of me. I thought that it was his right. He picked me up after my father died in a flash flood up in Montana. My mother died giving birth to me. Now, I'm sick of what I am and what I've been, but it is too late to turn back."

"It is never too late, Clint," Lucy said, and he stopped dead in his tracks and looked at her. She smiled a little and her eyes had a soft shine in the dark beyond the street lamp. "Somehow I wanted to call you by your first name. When you left the yard today, I told my father how bad I thought you were and that I hoped somebody would kill you. He took me to task for it, and defended you. He said if a dog had been taught to be mean and never knew a kind gesture or a word, then it wasn't to be completely blamed. And then I was sorry. I told myself when I heard that Drummond had been paid the money, that you had done it to save your own skin and not out of kindness to a family of poor nesters. It was just a minute ago that I changed my mind. A woman does that more easily than a man."

WHEN they came to the tie-rail in front of the town's drug and notion store, Clint saw Will Rodman sitting on the seat of the rig. He met the man's stony glance as he helped Lucy to the iron stirrup.

Rodman said, "Keep away from my daughter, Britten!"

"Good night, Ma'am," the gunman said, and quickly turned away.

He heard the nester say, "You saw Drummond. You told him, Lucy?" as he became part of the heavy traffic on the walk. He was no longer afraid for he had read a reasonable promise in that last glance Lucy had given him. He let his mind grope back over the rottenness and the violence of the last few years, and his hate for Anse Drummond became a canker inside him that almost brought pain. The man had warped his thinking and his soul. Drummond had done worse to little Johnny Sabin, and it was in Clint Britten's mind as he headed for the livery stable that men like Chavee and Nimbro

could not stop him from setting both Johnny and himself free.

He rode the claybank pretty hard to the Y Bench. He talked to Al Akerman and told him to hold off against the nesters until he proved Drummond was dead wrong about the rustled cattle. He told Akerman other things before he got into the saddle again and rode steadily southwest. On the fringe of the badlands, he rode past an old line cabin and drifted into the brush, and when he picked up a newly defined cow trail he threw a leg over the horn and made himself a smoke. He grimly considered the consequences if he failed in what he was about to do, if his talents proved unequal to the task. He would never see the sun come up again. And a dream would be over before it had hardly begun.

Clint tossed the stub of the cigarette away and prodded the claybank deeper into the potholes, and rounded the prow of a high ridge where two riders blocked the trail about a hundred yards ahead. They were only shapes in the dark.

He called out, "It's Clint Britten," and kept on riding.

In close, a hard-faced man leaned forward and peered at him, a carbine held ready. Then the brush-jumper said, "All right, Harry," and swung his horse around, Clint followed them to a draw where cattle were bunched, and got off his horse in front of a lean-to thrown up against the rocky wall.

Two men got up from beside a dying campfire, Chavee, a bony-faced tall splinter of a man, wearing two guns, and Nimbro, shorter and more heavily built, with abnormally long arms. He had met them once or twice before, and had long since been convinced of their cold-blooded efficiency. Over in Hardin he had seen Chavee gun Lew Bain down, and Bain had been built up as the fastest gun in the southwest.

Chavee asked insolently, the fever building up in his closely spaced eyes, "How fast are you now, Clint? How big a curly wolf has Anse made you?"

Nimbro laughed. "Give him a little time, Evers," he said. "Sit down, Clint. We got lots of time before we drive this stuff out. Some cold bacon in the frying pan if you want it."

He shook his head. His stomach was tightening up, and fear and doubt were tearing away at his courage as he walked toward the rustled cattle. He felt the constraining force of the gunmen's sharp eyes against his back, and everything considered, he was fully convinced that Anse Drummond had eliminated him from his future plans. A stark, cold-blooded realist, Drummond held no thrift for an employee who betrayed a serious weakness especially if it concerned a woman. The planting of the hides on the Rodman place would surely be his last chore for Drummond.

The moon was three-quarters full and it cast a ghostly light over the restlessly milling cattle. When Clint saw the brands that had been clumsily butchered, they told of the complete disdain Drummond had for law and order.

A bearded man grumbled, "How long do we have to wait, Britten. Hell, there's nobody to stop us."

"Two or three have to be butchered," Clint said. "You give me the fresh hides. After that I guess Chavee will get the stuff moving. He's giving the orders."

"You're right, Clint," a deep-throated voice said, and young Britten turned slowly and saw Evers Chavee standing right beside him. "Now that Drummond is moving in on the cattlemen he looks to men with guts. I've never seen you kill a man, Clint. It shows a yellow streak."

"I never saw a reason for it, Chavee. You can stop a man and also let him live." Clint walked back to the lean-to, keeping Johnny Sabin in mind and remembering the softness in Lucy Rodman's eyes, and he told himself that for all he knew he was faster with a gun than either of these killers. Always he had wasted a split second or two to plant his shots, but against Chavee and Nimbro he would have no cause to delay.

He hunkered down by the dead embers of the fire, looked across them at Pat

Nimbro, and was conscious of the man's full scrutiny. He built a smoke, weighed the odds once more and found them scary, but he was going up against them, win or lose. The time was now.

He saw Chavee talking to two men close to the bunched cattle, and then the two men walked toward one side of the draw and were lost in the semi-darkness. Nimbro picked up a stick and absently stirred the embers of the fire, and Clint quickly lashed out with a boot and knocked Nimbro over. The gunman's surprised curse brought Chavee running, and Clint said, "Far enough, you louse! Go for your gun!"

Chavee laughed wickedly as his right hand dropped, and Clint drew and fired in almost one motion and in the next moment he knew how fast he really was for Chavee was pitched forward and firing into the ground, his last mortal sound a sobbing gust of disbelief. Nimbro, frozen for a moment at what he had seen, suddenly made his own bid. Clint pivoted toward him, firing as his body came around. The heavy bullet hit Nimbro and sent him staggering backward, and he tripped over an exposed tree root and crashed heavily to the hard ground.

Gunfire came from up the draw, and the cattle bawled with terror. Clint felt a hammer-blow on his left arm and he knew he had been creased as he threw an answering shot. There came that frightening sound of pounding hoofs and clacking of entangled horns as the small herd stampeded. Clint, running for his claybank, heard a man's terrified scream, and he pitched forward on his face to get clear of the hoofs of a hard running riderless horse. He felt a stab of pain when he got up again. His shirt was wet and sticky just below his shoulder when he hauled himself into the saddle and gave his horse a rake with his spurs.

A FEW minutes later he pulled the lathered claybank to a stop on a narrow ridge between two deep ravines, and listened to the sounds of the scattering herd swiftly thin out. Then there was no sound but the soft wash of the night wind across the badlands, and Clint Britten felt the urge to lift his head like a timber wolf and howl up at the moon, for he was still alive and on his way to settle with Anse Drummond, and directly opposite, he knew, to the way Drummond had planned it. He felt an emotion that needed curbing, the inflating of an ego that is a part of every man who has lived by the sixgun. Faster than Chavee! Then he was faster than any man. He thought of Lucy Rodman and his rash of arrogance soon faded.

He heard a rider's passing through a wall of brush behind him. He waited until there was no more strumming of his nerves before he took the ride back to Maverick Springs. A numbness was creeping along his arm toward his shoulder and blood trickled out of his sleeve and stained his Levis. Clint was thinking it was many miles to town, and then he remembered that, a few days ago, he had ridden out of an arrayo where prickly pears grew. He headed the claybank that way, and luck kept riding with him, for he came to the arroyo before a half hour had passed.

He made a mash out of the prickly pears, having heard that such a poultice could draw a nail out of a barrelhead, and placed it over the wound, bandaging it with his sweat rag. Nearly an hour after midnight he rode into the mouth of the main street that was deserted save for a swamper who was mopping the walk in front of the Last Mile. The two windows of Anse Drummond's office were dimly lit.

He got off his horse in front of the false front, the effort bringing a brief grimace of pain to his mouth, and then stepped to the walk and slowly climbed the outside stairway. He opened the door of the office quickly and stepped inside. Drummond came up from his chair, his cigar rolling around at the side of his mouth. He stared at Britten's bandaged arm and the dried blood on the hand his man held stiffly away from his side, and blurted out, "You've been shot. Things went

wrong, blast you! Well, you're finished, Clint, completely finished."

"I killed Chavee, Anse!" Clint said, and bared his teeth with a twisted grin. "And Nimbro. The rustled cattle are scattered to hellangone in the brush. You're the one who's finished, Anse. You've got no more fast guns. You'll have no sheriff in the morning. You'll be tried like any cheap shirt-tail cattle thief."

"You killed Chavee?" Drummond's cigar dropped away from his mouth and he seemed to shrink to half his size.

"Sure, Anse. I didn't want to take orders from him," Clint said. "I owe you nothing but a bullet through your fat stomach. You're a low-down dog who took in a poor kid after your toughs had beaten his reason out of him, and let him scrub your floor and shine your stinking boots! Can't I make you go for that gun you've got in that drawer. Open it up, Anse. I'll give you a head start. Move!"

"Look, Clint," Drummond pleaded, his face white and oozing sweat. "I'll double what I pay you. We've been partners for a long time. We—" His eyes suddenly shifted and the desperation in them suddenly burned out.

Clint felt cold air at his back and knew the door behind him was opening, and he spun around, drawing his gun, and saw Nimbro. The man's face was as gray as wood ash, and shiny with sweat. His gun was clearing its holster when Clint fired. This time he knew, Nimbro would never get up again. And he also knew that when he faced Drummond, if the man gave him that much time, he would know the full shock of death. He had heard that a man never hears the sound of the gun that fires the bullet that kills him. The explosion seemed to shake the whole frame building as Clint spun around on his heels, but he felt no strike of lead. Never had he heard a sixgun blast out as much sound. And then he saw the reason for it, and stared at Drummond, his mouth snapping open.

Drummonds hand was a gory mess as he held it limply in front of him. A dark stain was widening on the front of his white shirt, and suddenly the man coughed liquidly and fell face down across his desk. He made a vain attempt to get on his feet, then tumbled away from the desk and crumpled to the floor.

Clint found the shattered sixgun near the wall. It's hammer had been blown away, and now he knew it had pierced Drummond's chest. The barrel of the Colt was split, and pieces of dried gumbo mud that were almost as hard as rock seeped out. Wonder built up in Clint's eyes, and he thought about the mills of the Gods that ground exceedingly fine.

An empty gun barrel—a vacancy. Johnny had been cleaning Drummond's office for a long time, and of course he had found the gun, but why, if Johnny never reasoned, did he make it a point to find gumbo mud and tamp it down with such grim determination?

Clint was hunkered down staring at the shattered gun when three men, two of them half-dressed, broke into the office. One stumbled over Nimbro's body and went sprawling. It was DeLong, the sheriff. Clint looked up at a man hauling up his galluses, one of the barkeeps in the Last Mile.

"Better get the doctor out of bed," Clint said. "I think the coyote has some life left in him. Drummond, I mean."

DeLong was on his feet, blustering and uncertain. "Who shot Drummond, Britten?"

"Johnny Sabin, but you can't arrest him. He wasn't here when it happened, DeLong. Take a look at what is left of Anse's gun. Maybe you'll catch on. Add the fact that he let the Colt get rusty, figuring he had men to do his shooting for him, you can see—"

THE doctor finally arrived, opened his battered satchel and looked Drummond over. He closed the bag and shrugged. "He hasn't much time. That hammer went into his stomach. Better let him finish out his lease here."

Clint smiled grimly; there had been little compassion in the medical man. The fear would go out of Maverick City with

the wagon that would take Drummond to the burying ground.

"That leaves only you, Sheriff," Clint said stonily. "I'd take the stage out first thing in the morning. Hand me your badge now."

DeLong said, "I'll be on the stage, Britten. I'm a fool but not a big enough one to stay."

The next day was a big one in Maverick Springs, and a good one. The cattlemen and the nesters watched them lay Anse Drummond to what little eternal rest he could expect, then went to the Last Mile and drank to a better understanding. Clint, his wound properly fixed, left the celebration early, and passing the mercantile he saw Johnny Sabin hunkered down on the walk, exploring a wide crack in the boards with a stick.

He said, "How are you, Johnny?" and the boy looked up at him. Clint was certain that there was an expression in the boy's eyes this time, a vague sign of contentment.

The boy said, "Jus' fine, Clint."

"They're making me sheriff, Johnny. It'll be lonesome in the jail. I'll want somebody to keep me company."

Johnny did not say anything, but Clint knew somehow, that he was trying to smile. When a person hasn't done that for years, it is as hard as learning to walk all over again. Clint kept walking, and when he came to the big locust tree near the blacksmith shop, he saw Lucy Rodman sitting on a bench in the shade. Her smile put the warmth of the sun to shame.

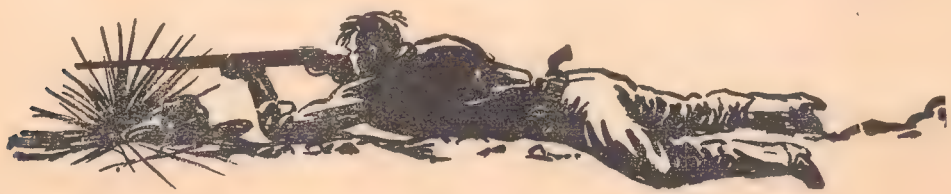
Will Rodman called out, "Keep her company, Clint. It'll take awhile yet to get the rim put back on this wheel."

Lucy moved over a little to give him room, and he was glad she did not mention Chavee and Nimbro. For the first time in his life he had killed human beings and it felt worse than he had ever supposed. She was mostly concerned about his arm.

He said, "It's nothing, I wonder if there isn't a place out at your place for Johnny, until we can see what the city doctors can do for him. He won't need much, Ma'am. He's a good worker."

"He can go out there today if he's ready, Clint," Lucy said. "Dad said he could use a couple of men, now that Akerman is going to run an irrigation ditch or two down from his pond."

"I'll bear that in mind," Clint said, and looked at her. The color mounted in her cheeks, and he knew she liked most of all what he still had to say. He decided it wasn't wise to rush things, not until he had two good arms.



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Hugh quickly realized the uselessness of his pistol at this long range

The Long HATE

by W. J. REYNOLDS

HUGH GOODNIGHT missed Sheriff Poe Streeter's funeral by an hour. The train was late into Trinity, and as he hurried through the T-cross of business buildings toward the cemetery, he could see the straggling line of people returning to town. But Goodnight continued on, feeling the need to pay his respects at the grave of his oldest and dearest friend.

He knew these people, and returned their sober greetings as he met them. All but John Kertcher. To Kertcher, he gave a level, probing stare, and received a direct return. For a moment there was rebellion in Hugh that this white maned old man who had hated Poe Streeter should survive to look upon that face, secure again in his arrogance and the power that Poe had challenged for the last time.

The cemetery was deserted but for Deputy Sheriff Con Gary and Beth Kertcher.

Con Gary was a well set up man in fine physical condition. His bluntly trimmed brown mustache offset somewhat his too sharp nose; his reddish-brown eyes were wide set and hooded in a selfcontained race that showed no man an emotion upon which to judge him. In his dark suit and

Hugh Goodnight couldn't quite believe his friend's death was accidental

polished boots, he was a solid man of authority. He looked at Hugh Goodnight without pleasure or dislike, just a careful study. It was ever so with Con Gary.

Beth Kertcher was a tall girl, and as Hugh remembered with brief pleasure, she had a swinging, free walk that was a joy to watch. Now her long lips were set gently firm and her gray eyes were very dark with some inner disturbance. For a moment there was desire for movement in her then it was quickly gone. Each of them nodded in return to Hugh's brief acknowledgment of them.

Goodnight removed his hat, his attention on the new mound of earth with the temporary cross at one end, the labeled card at the other.

Someone was afraid of you, Poe, Hugh Goodnight thought, you stood in someone's trail, and now they have you packed away and neatly labeled. But it doesn't end here. This whole county is a monument to you, and there were a great many here today who were sorry and there were a few who were not. Two men who hated you saw you buried, and one is still here, wringing the last drop of satisfaction from this day.

He said a silent prayer before turning away to reset his hat. Beth Kertcher said gently, "We're all sorry to see this day, Hugh."

He looked at her in silence for a moment. "Yes."

Beth and Con fell into step with him and without being bluntly rude he could only walk with them. For a brief moment, it seemed to Hugh that Con Gary moved stiffly, but a second glance showed him only a solid stride.

"Poe went over Horseshoe turn, Hugh," Con Gary said. "It was an accident."

"Poe had been over Horseshoe a lot of times," Hugh said.

"Yes. But he was driving the Nancy mare to his rig. He should have known better. I think he intended to be back before dark, but he got to jawing with Stinson about his horses and forgot the time."

"Any idea what happened?"

"Nothing definite," Gary said. "Apparently Nancy shied—you know that fool mare—and over they went at the inside bend. It could have been a coyote, bear, couger, anything, or nothing. You've seen Nancy jump ten feet sideways from a racket. She's broken a dozen pairs of shafts for Poe's buggy. But she was a buggy pulling fool when he was in a hurry. Everybody knew how she was."

"Something for his enemies to know," Hugh murmured. Of whom, he thought, John Kertcher and his man, Con Gary, were the most deadly.

As though she were reading his thoughts, Beth Kertcher said, "Dad was late getting in that evening, Hugh. He was alone and had no alibi."

Gary's lips moved silently under his mustache, his nearest approach to a smile. "And I was at Circle to see Beth here. I came along two hours behind him and didn't know he was down there. Joe Stinson found him next morning and got Circle boys to bring him in."

Hugh thought, there's only one way you could have gotten there ahead of Poe to scare the mare over Horseshoe. You would have had to take the Pass trail. He said, "I understand there's been a caveoff in the Pass, leaving a gap."

Con Gary's hooded eyes held no amusement or anger. "Yes. I was riding Nantan."

"And Nantan," Hugh said, "will go down in a ditch but he won't jump."

"That's right. You want to work for the sheriff's office, Hugh, until you get your law practice going?"

"My old job would be nice, Con."

"It's yours. I'll need some help, and you're the only man available with experience."

"Have the commissioners appointed you to fill Poe's vacancy?"

"Not yet. The commissioners' court meets next week. It's on the agenda."

They came to the sheriff's office, and Hugh picked up his valise which he had dropped there on his way to the cemetery. "I'll see Lura Perkins about a room. Will tomorrow morning be all right to report for work, Con?"

"Sure."

"I'll walk as far as the hotel with you," Beth said.

Con Gary was still looking after them when Hugh, only a short distance away, turned back. "Oh, Con, something you should know. I saw Gordon DeSpain on the train, about ten miles out. Just a glimpse but I'll swear it was him."

"DeSpain? What could he be doing back here?"

"I'd like to know," Hugh said.

"Did you look through the train after you saw him?"

"Yes. It was slow going about there, and he could have dropped off."

"Thanks, Hugh."

HUGH, with Beth beside him, resumed his course toward Lura Perkins' boarding house.

"It's funny," Beth mused. "How you, Gordon DeSpain and Con Gary, keep crossing each other's trails, isn't it? All three of you used to fight each other. Gordon helping his father as his deputy—how many times did they jail you and Con on Saturday nights? Now Con Gary is sheriff, you're a lawyer, and Gordon DeSpain is an outlaw, and I hear, a hired murderer."

"Times change, Beth." It seemed an inadequate remark, but he waited, wondering what Beth was getting at.

"Yes, times do, but people don't change much, do they, Hugh? You have already tried your first case and convicted one man, perhaps two. Father and Con Gary."

"The evidence is circumstantial," he said gently. "And inconclusive."

"Poe Streeter and Dad fought for fifteen years, after Poe left Circle, but he was a good man and Dad will freely admit it. Too good a man to be shoved over a cliff, Hugh. That's not Dad's way."

"No," Hugh agreed. "But John Kertcher was never one to make idle threats. He swore he would see me and Poe in our own jail, run out of the country—or dead."

She nodded. "He thought a lot of Uncle Dode. He carried him all of Dode's life, blinded himself to all Dode's faults. But much has come out about Dode in the last two years, Hugh. A positive identification in a mail robbery, one hired killing and one murder. I think what really shook Dad into opening his eyes was when the widow of one of those men stepped into our living room a year ago and tried to kill Dad."

"I didn't know about that."

"Few people do. Dad hasn't been the same since, and his attitude toward you and Poe Streeter changed after that." They were both silent for a dozen steps then Beth said, "Will you set up law practice here, Hugh?"

His smile was without much humor. "In John Kertcher's county? With John's sheriff in office? I'll probably leave as soon as I'm admitted to the bar."

"You'll run, Hugh? That's not like you."

"I have a weakness," he said. "I like to eat regular. Let's face it, Beth. Would I get any cases with John Kertcher disapproving? Con Gary dislikes me even more than your father does. Con thinks way ahead with the patience of Job. Con is not a man to fool with, Beth. Why he offered me the job of deputy is beyond me, but you can be sure Con Gary has a reason. A very good reason."

She was hesitant as they paused near the corner of the hotel, but she had more to say. There was a reflective, slightly worried expression on her face.

"I agree with you, Hugh, on both counts. I wonder if I didn't make a mistake the day Poe was killed. Con asked me again to marry him. I suppose I was a little tired of telling him no. But I did, again, and told him I was in love, and mentioned a name. Hugh, the look on his face frightened me. It was a hellish look, Hugh, and it scared me, but you know Con and his emotions. The look was gone in a second, and he was his usual unperturbed self."

Hugh moved uneasily. He didn't want to get involved again, there was too much to forget now with Beth Kertcher, more than he would ever forget. "Probably nothing will come of it," he said. "You might have to bail the fellow out of jail

regularly!" But his own words lacked conviction even to himself.

Beth gave him a quick glance, and smiled. "I'll go in, Hugh, goodbye."

"Goodbye, Beth." He watched her go into the hotel then resumed his way down the street.

So, he thought soberly, Beth had refused Con again and she was troubled about it. And she had reason to be. Despite Con Gary's calm and unruffled exterior, he was a man torn by violent emotions. Con had raised his sights high from being the son of the town's bum. How Con must writhe inwardly over this man Beth loved. Goodnight had the grace to smile, for once John Kertcher had kicked him bodily off Circle for wanting to marry Beth!

Lu Perkins was a chubby woman with snow white hair and bright blue eyes. Hugh Goodnight dropped his valise in the hall and hugged her to him. She beamed and wiped her eyes. "How's my new lawyer, Hugh?"

"Broke," Hugh said grinning. "How about some credit?"

"Go on with you, Hugh Goodnight! This is your home!" Quick tears filled her eyes. "You and Poe, Hugh."

He put his arm around her as they walked toward his old room, finally she said, "Will you stay here, Hugh?"

"For awhile. Con gave me my deputy job back."

She stopped and looked at him sharply. "I hope you know what you're doing, Hugh."

"What does that mean, Lu?"

"Just what you think it does," she said. "Are you hungry? That's a foolish question!"

NEXT morning, with the oath of office adminstered, making him a deputy sheriff, Hugh said to Con Gary, "If you've got nothing urgent on, Con, I'd like to ride up to Horseshoe."

Con Gary said, "I thought you might, but what do you expect to find. I've been over it."

"Actually, nothing, Con. Nostalgic reasons, I suppose."

"Go ahead, Hugh. There are only some papers to serve, I'll take care of them."

"Thanks, Con."

The Horseshoe was a hairpin turn on a rock shelf, hugging the inside of the mountain's side with no more than eight feet of space at the sharpest point. It was a nasty place for a vehicle, and Hugh had often wondered why Kertcher, with, at times, idle manpower at Circle had not used some of it to widen this point. The road otherwise was adequate except for some fifty feet here. Stinson's horse ranch and two other small places beyond Stinson were the only other users and the small ranchers, being farther mostly used a longer way around.

Hugh tied his horse at a wider point and walked to the bend, and stood looking down the nearly straight fall at the wreck of the buggy, and the buzzards moving soggily about the picked skeleton of Nancy. Finally, he moved back to roll a smoke with fingers that trembled slightly.

He thought of the Pass again, the trail entering this road not three hundred yards farther toward Circle. A man on horseback could have left Circle two hours behind Poe and still beat him here by taking the Pass trail. Con had understood that when Hugh mentioned the caveoff. Hugh had not seen the caveoff, but he knew about where it was. Many horses wouldn't take such a jump, and Nantan was definitely one such. Gary's horse was well known to Hugh Goodnight, Hugh had once owned the horse and had sold him for that reason.

Hugh finished his smoke and tossed the butt away. He was reluctant to let this go. There seemed some discrepancy in the obvious conclusions that worried his mind. Abruptly, he stood up and returned to his horse. He was untying the reins when the sound of wheels came from toward town.

Hugh waited, and presently a buggy with John Kertcher driving and Beth beside him, rolled into sight and came to a stop beside Hugh. "Morning, Beth, Mr. Kertcher," he said.

Beth's greeting was gave and so was that of John Kertcher. The rancher's craggy face showed little and his steady blue gaze was enigmatic. "A tough way to go," Hugh said.

John Kertcher said, "It's not the way I would have done it, had I had the desire anymore."

Hugh nodded. John Kertcher met his enemies in the open with a gun in his hand, and in these later years, with the law in his pocket—until Poe Streeter. Even then, Hugh thought, he had his man Con Gary as head deputy. Yet Kertcher's words were a lot coming from him, and Hugh accepted them.

"Stop by Circle some time, Hugh," Beth said.

"Thanks, Beth."

Kertcher's nod was firm, and his blue eyes for a moment held a real friendliness. Hugh stood watching the buggy move on with a puzzled frown. Beth had not been exaggerating, John Kertcher had softened much since Hugh had seen him last.

Presently he mounted and rode after the buggy. When he came to the entrance to the Pass, he turned into it. The showers at this altitude were too frequent to have left sign and Hugh's eyes did only a normal searching of the rough trail. In ten minutes of slow climbing he came to the caveoff.

He tied his horse well back and proceeded out on the rock shelf. It was higher here than the Horseshoe trail and the only place in the Pass that touched the outer rim of the mountain. For a hundred yards the trail was along the side of an abrupt, layered face, and twenty yards from Hugh was the wedge shaped caveoff. Hugh moved up to it. There was an eight foot gap at the outer edge but it tapered inward to no more than three feet. But a shoulder of rock prevented a horseman or man from reaching the narrow part next to the wall. A five foot jump or a little less.

Hugh squatted, his eyes searching the near edge but there were no scars or other signs of where a horse would have landed. Still, there was a growing excitement in Hugh as his searching mind picked out the flaw he had been missing.

A man could have rode to this caveoff, left his horse, jumped the caveoff and reached the Horseshoe before Poe Streeter, a slapping hat, a gunshot at the crucial moment, would have sent Nancy over the edge with the buggy. The man could have retreated, jumped the caveoff and retraced his course with no one the wiser.

John Kertcher? Such craft and the method didn't fit John Kertcher. Gary? More in keeping with the man, but why? Gary hated Streeter, and was a man torn inside with ambition and secret plans. He also hated Hugh Goodnight. Eventually, with Kertcher's backing, Con would have gotten the sheriff's office. Was he in such a hurry for another reason?

Hugh retreated back twenty feet, removed spurs and gunbelt and coat, then stood measuring the caveoff. He ran, leaped and sprawled on the far side for safety's sake. He set his jaw momentarily against the pain of skinned elbows and knees then moved on up the trail. The horse probably would have stamped some sign in the hour to an hour and a half he must have been here.

Suddenly, he stopped at the far edge of the shelf where a thin soil had furnished rooting for a scrubby bush. The scratches where a horse could have stood weren't conclusive, but there was a dark, irregular, spot that was—to Hugh. He squatted down, examing the spot carefully. The droppings had been cleaned up and the spot brushed with something.

Hugh bent lower, fished his penknife from his pocket and carefully picked at the minute cracks and among the fine gravel. He spread his handkerchief and shortly, he had a tiny gathering of the droppings from a grain fed horse.

There was a grim set to Hugh's jaw, how that man must have cursed his horse when he returned from his murder trip.

HUGH folded the handkerchief and replaced it in his pocket, and turned back down the trail to the caveoff. He paused, set himself and launched himself

at the caveoff as a bullet cried past his head followed by the flat crack of a rifle.

Hugh didn't pause but sprawled across the caveoff, whipped over as another bullet slashed off the rock beside him, then he was up, lunging furiously for the protection of a bulge of rock in the wall. A third bullet narrowly missed even with his violent lateral movement, and Hugh Goodnight knew his ambusher was no amateur rifleman.

From the safety of his covert, Hugh looked at the gunbelt twenty feet away and dismissed it. He had no chance of reaching it, but on sober reflection he decided there was no need for it. The rifleman couldn't see the pistol and would not know that Hugh was unarmed. Then the open space beyond the caveoff discounted any attempt of the ambusher closing in on him. He'd had his too hurried try and now he would have to leave. Presently, faint sounds up the Pass that soon faded told Hugh that his assailant was gone.

Hugh waited another ten minutes, listening intently then hurriedly gathered his coat, gunbelt and spurs, and retreated to his horse before donning them.

So, Hugh thought, Poe's death was no accident. Knowing Hugh would be here, he had been watching. Then why hadn't he used his rifle when Hugh was still and presenting an easily hit target?

Hugh could only assume that the murderer had arrived too late and had taken what chance he had. Why hadn't Con Gary been bothered when he was looking over the terrain? It was a grim and sobering thought that stayed with Hugh all the way back to town.

It was past midafternoon when Hugh got back to town, and Con Gary was not in the office. He cleaned up, salved his deeply skinned knees and elbows, and ate an early supper and went back to the office. Con Gary rode in just before dark.

He looked tired as he came into the office and eased into a chair, his glance at Hugh was casual, but Hugh thought he detected a hint of some emotion deep in the reddish-brown eyes.

"Had to chase that damned Grayson clean to Buckman's store," Gary said.

A good fifteen miles opposite town from Horseshoe, Hugh thought. It couldn't possibly have been Gary shooting at him. Gary would never have risked just a possible shot either. He'd have been sure.

"Have any luck, Hugh?"

"Not much. Only a bushwhacker. Damned near got me, too."

Gary was looking at him steadily. "Poor shot or too far?"

"His shooting appeared to be above average. I'd say he was shooting down and hadn't got set. He must have just arrived. I was leaving the caveoff." He left it there, not revealing the finding of the droppings.

Gary mused, "I wonder why someone would be shooting at you?"

"I'm wondering the same thing. But not enough to go into the pass looking."

"No. That wouldn't have been smart." He sat in silent thought momentarily, then, "Guess I'll have a look up there again tomorrow." He got stiffly to his feet. "I'm going to eat." He went out . . .

The next morning, Gary was already at the office when Hugh arrived. Joe Stinson was fidgeting beside a sweaty horse.

"Hugh," Gary said, "Stinson's stallion was stolen last night. How about taking a look. Better take some grub, you might have to do some trailing."

"All right. Does Carl Stinson come to the sheriff now? He used to shoot his own thieves."

"Carl had an accident a few months back. Broke his leg and several ribs. He don't get around much yet.

"You can get grub at our house, Hugh," Joe Stinson said. Joe was fourteen and looked a little cranky. "I wanted to go after him but Pa wouldn't let me."

"Any word on DeSpain, Con?"

Gary shook his head. "I notified the surrounding counties. There's no word on him. You couldn't have been mistaken, Hugh?"

"No. Well, let's ride, Joe."

It was noon when they rode up to Stinson's house, and Carl Stinson rose with the aid of a crutch. "Come in, Hugh.

Didn't know you were back." He looked at the badge on Hugh's shirt. "Gary is improving, I figured he'd come!"

Hugh grinned at the back-handed compliment and went forward to shake hands with Stinson while Joe took the horses to the barn. Stinson called, "Joe, bring Hugh that claybank when you come back." He opened the door. "Go in, Hugh, dinner's ready and I'll have Ma fix you some grub to take."

Stinson gave Hugh all the facts he knew while they ate, the stallion had been taken right out of the barn by one man, just after midnight. There'd been only a slight commotion and Stinson had not investigated it until about an hour afterward when he kept thinking about it. "That thief was a good hand with a horse, Hugh, no doubt about it. That stallion is mighty cranky."

"As I remember," Hugh said, "DeSpain was a good man with horses."

"DeSpain?" Hugh told him about seeing DeSpain on the train. And Stinson stifled a curse at his wife's sharp look. "Are we going to have him around here again?"

THEY went out to the porch, leaving Joe to finish his belated meal. "If DeSpain got that horse, Hugh, it'll be a hard chase. What did he want with my stallion? He's too well know and cranky to ride for a man in DeSpain's business."

"Too many puzzles around here lately," Hugh said. "You sit on the porch here a lot, Carl?"

Stinson cursed. "I used to love this porch, Hugh, but the last two months with this bum hip, I've got my belly full of it. Seems like I'm here all day and half the night!"

"Were you out here the night Poe was killed?" At Stinson's sharp glance and affirmative answer, Hugh asked, "See anything up toward the Pass? Lights?"

"Reckon I did, Hugh. Just a few flickers, matches, maybe."

Hugh nodded. "Thanks, Carl. Did you mention that to anybody?"

"Just you, and Ma."

"Then don't, Carl. Not even to Gary."

Stinson growled, "I wouldn't tell him the time of day."

Hugh told Stinson about being shot at, then forestalled the rancher's question by saying, "Gary was at Buckman's store."

Stinson closed his mouth over the question, then said, "Funny doings, Hugh. Kertcher isn't a bushwhacker whatever else he might be. He had it in for you and Poe for putting a rope around his precious Dode's neck. But for Kertcher's influence and money, Dode wouldn't have been shot dead by Poe Streeter while trying to bushwhack Poe. Kertcher seems changed lately, Hugh, and I don't like to think he'd have a hand in this."

"Well, I'll mosey along, Carl. See you."

Two hours later, Hugh Goodnight was five miles beyond Stinson's in range growing more and more rugged. But he had the horsethief's direction and there was only one way he could go. Through Rendezvous Canyon.

Rendezvous was nearly three quarters of a mile wide here, but as Hugh knew, it grew steadily narrower as it twisted higher and higher. They wouldn't leave the canyon now for another six or seven miles.

A half hour later Hugh came to the sight of Stinson's old ranch, where he had started his horse ranch. There was a brook, wide and puddled crooking across the canyon under a few small trees. The brook was fed by the spring at the house sight. All that was left was the eighteen-inch curbing of the spring, spilling a trickle of water.

Hugh rode over to the spring, noting that the thief had done so too, and dismounted for a drink. There were boot marks in the mud and Hugh studied them a moment before bending down to drink.

The bullet made a high pressured sound in passing, and Hugh's horse leaped with a startled snort, stepped on the reins, and reared, snapping them near the bits. Hugh lunged for the horse, even as the next bullet skinned the animal and it went pounding down the canyon. Hugh went back for the rock curbing in a lunging dive as a third bullet made a gray slash on the rock.

He had his pistol in his hand but quickly realized its uselessness. He saw the puff of smoke hanging over a nest of boulders on the south slope of the canyon a hundred and fifty yards away. And his own rifle was in his saddle scabbard going hell bent for Stinson's. He was caught flat and for a moment temper was a violent pressure in Hugh Goodnight.

He joggled his hat at the edge of the curbing and after a moment he heard a distant laugh. He looked then and saw Gordon DeSpain standing on that nest of boulders, laughing.

There was no surprise in Hugh, only a vague fury at his own blindness. This was a trap, and he had been set up expertly, and now the jaws had closed. He knew now why those first bullets had been used to stampede his horse instead of on himself.

It was DeSpain's way to milk the last bit of drama from his acts, it fed his ego and made him nine feet tall. It had always been so with Gordon. He was a good shot and he could have killed Hugh easily. But Gordon DeSpain had to have his show, and he, as well as Hugh, knew that Hugh could not last out the hours left of daylight in his exposed position.

"I expected better from you, Hugh," DeSpain shouted. "That lawyer school didn't help you none!"

"Guess I was thinking of Poe, Gordon. That didn't look like your work."

"It wasn't, Hugh. I like it better with excitement, not jumping at somebody in the dark like a damn bear!" He laughed. "But that was me yesterday. I just didn't get there quick enough to get set!"

"It's Gary, isn't it, Gordon? Why does he want me and Poe dead? He hates our guts, but he wouldn't kill us unless it profitted him!"

"Hell, Hugh, that lawyer school did make you stupid! But cheer up, son, you got awhile to think about it. Boy, are you in a fix!"

Hugh knew he had all he'd get out of DeSpain. He tilted his pistol barrel and fired. The bullet kicked up gravel well short of DeSpain. DeSpain laughed. "All right, boy, we'll open the ball if that's what you want." He dropped out of sight.

DeSpain fired, and the bullet skinned the edge of the curbing, a breath across Hugh's back. Another smacked the curb and then two more. Hugh, hugging the ground, felt one of the stones come loose and roll off his back. Hugh gritted his teeth in a raging helplessness.

Gary had been thorough, and Hugh quit skirting the thing and faced it. Gary wanted Poe dead because it was necessary to killing Hugh Goodnight. It would have been tantamount to a hang rope otherwise. Had Beth told Gary she was still in love with Hugh Goodnight?

It was a logical answer. With the two men he hated most dead, Gary would have a clear field with Beth Kertcher, he would be sheriff, and with Kertcher behind him, pushing his son-in-law, senator or governor could easily be the results.

A MAN never knows, Hugh thought, the three of them, Hugh Goodnight, Con Gary and Gordon DeSpain had grown up here. Gary, son of the town's bum, half starved and kicked about. Gordon, the son of a killer marshal. Hugh, son of Circle's stop bronc stomper who had been in turn stomped by a bronc.

Hugh had stayed at Circle and aspired, with a half hundred other young men, to marry Beth Kertcher. Only Hugh had attained the inside lane with Beth. John Kertcher had kicked him bodily off the ranch with the blunt statement that he had better plans for his daughter than to marry a thirty a month cowhand.

Poe Streeter, then deputy sheriff, had helped Hugh get another job and they had become fast friends. It was Poe who had brought Hugh around to saving his money and making something of himself. Gordon had become an outlaw killer. Gary had stayed to polish the apple with Kertcher, never once relinquishing his plan to marry Beth. All but Kertcher seemed to know it.

Con Gary plodded steadily, doing Kertcher's bidding, and finally Kertcher had made him Streeter's deputy, a political trick that Streeter had had to bow to,

however reluctantly. Now the road was open for Con Gary.

And Hugh Goodnight's life was running out. With his face in the mud, he recalled Beth's words when he'd been kicked off Circle and wanted her to run away with him. "Dad has been good to me, Hugh, he'll come around when he's convinced. He doesn't remember now that when a Kertcher loves, that's all. We're young, and we can wait. I won't go flatly against Dad yet." Hugh had left, stiff with shattered young pride.

DeSpain's next shot skinned Hugh's arm, setting up a sharp stinging, and Hugh saw that Gordon had shifted positions a little, holed up now near where a ravine came out of the slope. Hugh peeped around the curbing, looking longingly at the scattered boulders on the floor a hundred feet short of Gordon's present position.

"I think I've got you treed now, Hugh!" DeSpain shouted. "I can see a piece of you!"

Hugh scrooched as flat as he could. "I didn't think you were a back shooter, Gordon?"

"Are you begging, Hugh? What the hell difference does it make if you kill a man. Is he any less dead back or front?"

He was silent, and Hugh dared not raise his head. His muscles crawled with the momentary expectancy of a bullet. When it came it was a numb streak across his shoulder that became a burn. Involuntarily, Hugh jumped and the second bullet tapped him, gouging deeper in his back muscles. Hugh was surprised to find his head swimming but he pressed his face into the coolness of the mud and the spell passed.

This is it, Goodnight, he thought, you're dead. I wonder if Gary rode to the Pass to check if I'd found his sign, or if he's sitting there in town with his damned dead pan face. All Gordon would have to do would be wait now, and I'd probably bleed to death . . .

A rifle cracked and it took DeSpain's surprised shout and another shot before Hugh realized there'd been no bullet. A third shot came with the high scream of a ricochet from DeSpain's position, and Hugh came upward instantly. The rifle was firing steadily now, the shots flatting sharply, and the bullets were slapping DeSpain's rock nest.

Hugh was running with all of his power for those boulders below DeSpain's nest. Once he fell, and realized with some surprise that he was weak. He made a boulder to his liking, and plunged down behind it, his .44 slanted forward, but his eyes were blind with the tremendous exertion and weakness from shock.

Gradually the fuzziness cleared from Hugh's eyes. The rifle had stopped firing now and there was a strained silence. He hoped that DeSpain hadn't seen him run here, and there was a good chance that he hadn't, pinned down by that other rifle.

Hugh examined DeSpain's position, chose the most likely retreat into the ravine, trained his .44 on the place and waited. There was no movement there, and Hugh laid the barrel of his .44 over a convenient rock and forced himself to relax. This had taken an unexpected turn for DeSpain and he would leave.

IT WAS a ten minute wait before he saw DeSpain crawling toward the ravine, bellying along, sliding his rifle ahead of him. Hugh sighted the .44 carefully.

You've had your fun for today, Gordon, he thought grimly, now it's my turn. He squeezed the trigger. With the buck of the .44, DeSpain jerked, reared upward to his knees, and Hugh shot him again. DeSpain plunged forward on his face, arms outflung.

Hugh stood up, then braced himself against a boulder as dizziness blinded him. It was just beginning to leave him when the bullet struck him. The shot came from behind and the bullet caught Hugh in his left side and flung him around and downward to the ground.

Hugh was numb with shock and seeing Con Gary standing yonder on the rim of the wash leading across the flats. Gary was panting heavily, and sweat had wet his shirt from his run across the valley

floor. He levered another shell into the rifle, and lifted it and Hugh Goodnight knew that he was a dead man. He couldn't move.

The whiplike snap of a rifle cracked against Hugh's ears, then another and another. He stared at Con Gary in astonishment as the man's body jerked from the smashing slugs, then fell loosely to the ground.

Hugh was still there, sitting numbly when John Kertcher with Beth beside him rode up. Beth ran to Hugh. "Hugh! Are you hurt badly?"

"It was a trap," Hugh said. "And I fell right into it." Both Kertcher and Beth started stripping his shirt to staunch his wounds. "It was Con all the time. But how did he get here? And how about you two?"

"The train," Kertcher said. "He caught the train, walked the five miles from the railroad. He would have caught the night train back. He had it all figured as usual." He smiled a little. "As for us, we rode by Stinson's and heard about you coming up here. We nearly killed our horses getting here. Beth thought that Gary was fixing to kill you. I guess she was right."

Hugh nodded. "Con couldn't trust a man to do a job for him. He had to check him. That was his mistake this time. He'd brought Gordon in to kill me, but he killed Poe himself, by going through the Pass."

"Yes," Kertcher said. He looked at Hugh levelly. "Next week you'll be sheriff until you're ready to set up law practice. I'm sorry for my treatment of you, Hugh." He got to his feet. "Stay with him, Beth, I'll go to Stinson's for a wagon." He left quickly.

After awhile, Hugh said, "I knew Con hated me but not that much."

"It was my fault, Hugh," Beth said. Her color was high but she met his look steadily. "I told him I still loved you, that I was going to marry you."

"Beth!"

"He was going to kill you but he had to get Poe out of the way first. Poe would have seen him hung and he knew it. He wanted me and he wanted Circle, Hugh. Con was burning up with the way he'd been raised. He had to get ahead and nothing, not even murder, would stop him."

Hugh's hand closed over hers. "Beth. Why did you tell him you loved me, Beth?"

Her cheeks were flushed. "Because I do love you, Hugh. There's never been anybody else."

"And your father?"

"He won't object. Even if he did I'd go against him now, Hugh."

His eyes were gentle, warm. "It's been lonesome, Beth. Will you marry a jackleg lawyer?"

"Yes, Hugh."

She came into his arms without false modesty or restraint, a woman who had the patience to wait for her man.

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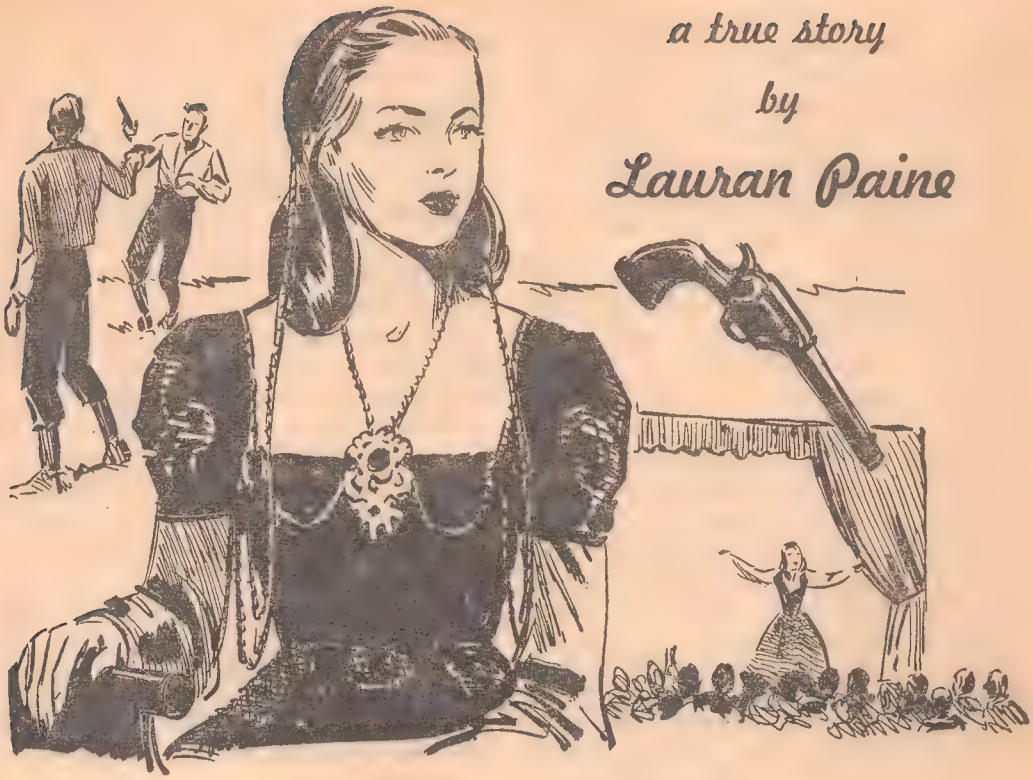

a true story

by

Lauran Paine

Lotta Crabtree

SHE danced in the orange glow of candles, red hair throwing back the warmth, the softness, her eyes as clear as twilight skies and just as blue. The place was Rabbit Creek, California, the time the early eighteen-fifties, the dancer, Lotta Crabtree, darling of the mining camps, and her audience was bearded miners, rough handed, armed with a knife in their boots and a pistol strapped to their middles. A hard kind to please but Lotta pleased them all. When she was finished with her act the men stomped, applauded, shouted through the smoke steeped atmosphere. Lotta Crabtree was six years old.

Her first public appearance at six brought to the mining camps of the early-day Pacific Coast a charmer who was to amass a fortune in excess of four million dollars in her lifetime. An actress of great and wholesome ability. A woman whose life had sadness and beauty, wealth and poverty, in almost equal parts.

She was christened Charlotte Mignon Crabtree. At the time of her birth her mother, Mary, was in the East but her father, John Crabtree, a bookseller by trade, was in the California gold fields searching for the fortune he would never find.

He returned East when Mary wrote that he had a daughter but stayed only long enough to attend the christening then, in 1850, returned to California and the arduous search for wealth.

In 1853 Mary and Charlotte Mignon joined their husband and father in Grass Valley, California. A little later Charlotte

Mignon—by this time nick-named Lotta—appeared in a rough theater-of-sorts at Petaluma, a nearby town. Her fragile, childish beauty stole the miners' hearts. She was something with strong appeal for men whose families were thousands of miles away, while to others she was a symbol of what they were struggling to attain—a family.

Lotta understandably appealed to an altogether different instinct than did then-popular Lola Montez, the English harridan who, under a Spanish name, was the toast and the flame of the wild mining camps.

And perhaps most admirable of all her traits was Lotta's complete acceptance of the roughness, the boisterousness and violence that went with the places where she acted. Older actors and actresses flinched, lost their lines, paled, when the miners hurled abuse or praise at them and not infrequently shot into the ceiling to indicate approval or disapproval. Little Lotta, knowing no other way of life, ignored interruptions, remained imperturbable. This as much as the cobalt-blue eyes, her dimples and slow smile, enslaved a host of hard men from 1850 on.

At Lotta's Grass Valley debut Lola Montez was present. She recognized Lotta's ability. Understanding that competition in this instance was something she couldn't hope to conquer, coming from the source that it did. She said: "In her I see a reincarnation of me. I can make her the greatest actress in the world."

Mary Crabtree allowed the great demimondaine to coach Lotta. The fact that Lola herself had no acting ability and relied on her luscious and ample physical endowments to get her over the rough spots in life, apparently wasn't missed by Lotta's mother. When Lola announced that the child, Lotta, was ready to make her international debut under the Montez sponsorship, Mrs. Crabtree demurred, but firmly. Lotta was not only her bread and butter, she was her daughter as well. Lola left in disgust and anger and Lotta turned to serious study of music and dancing.

About this time Mrs. Crabtree gave birth to a son, Jack Crabtree, the brother Lotta would adore to his dying day. Also, at this time, Lotta's father, John, was punching glory-holes through the Sonora foothills still searching for the gold he'd never find. And also at this time Mary Crabtree became acquainted with a dashing fellow named Martin Taylor. Mart was a wandering player-of-sorts, a disinclined worker at labor but an adept chap with a slowly lowered eyelid, the warm, sultry eye, the languid, caressing touch. Mary Crabtree with two children and an absent husband was susceptible.

Lotta, particularly, became fond of the wandering actor with the long dark hair and soft mouth. He fit into her fatherless family quite well. So well, in fact, that Lotta's mother decided they would all—little Jack, Lotta, Mrs. Crabtree and Mart Taylor—leave the diggings for the brighter, brassier blandishments of lusty San Francisco. Accordingly, Mary Crabtree left a note for John, who was miles and thoughts away from his family, digging, panning, crevice-mining absorbed in his search for riches.

THE Crabtrees and Mart Taylor made the easy journey from the gold diggings to The Gem of the Pacific, by wagon. They camped like gypsies under the purple skies and watched the lanterns of the night—the stars—come out one by one. They sang and danced and in due time entered brawling, odoriferous San Francisco of Barbary Coast days.

Settled, they took bookings where they could find them, worked when and where they could. Lotta's childish charm was unfailing but her acting ability, sufficient for Grass Valley and Petaluma, had some rough corners San Franciscans didn't appreciate. One such, a man who owned an established and heavily patronized theater and was for that reason considered an apt critic, was Thomas McGuire.

After squirming through one of Lotta's plays, McGuire truthfully said that she wasn't good enough for exacting San Franciscans' taste. This might have gone unnoticed but for a startling apparition

who now descended upon the city in handsome clothes, an outraged and icy eye, and a pistol strapped under his frock coat. John Crabtree, the father, in search of Mart Taylor and an erring wife.

John read McGuire's criticism of his little daughter and issued a resounding challenge to the showman. Tom McGuire dutifully accepted and it was pointedly and abruptly proven that John hadn't spent all his time grubbing for gold. Somewhere along the line he'd developed into an expert pistol shot. He stretched Tom McGuire flat on the grass with a bullet through his side, nothing serious though, unless McGuire refused to apologize and retract, in which case John had the right to shoot him again. Tom apologized and retracted. John accepted then suggested that McGuire sponsor Lotta in his own theater. This McGuire also agreed to. Recuperating from his narrow squeak, Tom McGuire went farther; he billed Lotta as "the celebrated danseuse and vocalist." The Crabtrees made money, Mart Taylor made tracks, and Lotta made the remark: "I'm not a great actress and I'm not a great singer. I'm a low comedian. But I will be a great actress, or at least a successful one."

With money to afford it she turned to a very serious study of dancing, singing, acting. She seemed absorbed in her art, dedicated to it. She knew men in these years and lacked for nothing including ardent admirers, but she was as free of scandal then as she would remain throughout her long life. But, while her name wasn't linked with any man's, especially, at this time, in later years she admitted that during this phase of her career she was very much in love. She never revealed the man's name. When she died his name was still a mystery and an untold secret, but one of several alternatives seems to have existed then.

Whoever Lotta's idol was, he either didn't or couldn't, return her affection. He may have been a married man or one of the drifting horde who came and went, or, rarer still, possibly, someone who was left unmoved by her beauty, her wealth, her wholesomeness. Whoever he was, when she finally left San Francisco, nationally famous, bound for New York City and resounding acclaim, he became a memory, for Lotta now spent her affection on Jack, her baby brother, and like a legion of other well-intentioned women before and after her, she ruined a man with generosity and softness.

In New York Lotta became a sensation in the part of Little Nell in the play Little Nell and the Marchioness, which packed Walleck's Theater every night. Money rolled in. Platitudes inundated her. She became "The Champagne Cocktail Girl," and Jack became almost as notorious as his sister was famous, for wild parties, prolonged debauches, incredible dinners—all on Lotta's bank account.

Then, in 1869, at twenty-two years of age, so beautiful and shapely that men caught their breath at sight of her, Lotta returned to San Francisco and the elaborate stage presentations written around her red hair and startling beauty.

THE same San Francisco that had swallowed up John Crabtree, her father, and still held memories of her childhood years. But if her father had disappeared Lotta's mother hadn't. It was Mary Crabtree who assumed the role of banker-investor-guide for her famous daughter and whatever virtues Mary may have lacked she had a sound and analytical mind.

Lotta's investments were sound, they made money, accrued interest, swelled comfortably under the aegis of Mary Crabtree, while Lotta sang, danced, acted, and squandered cash on thoroughly worthless Jack Crabtree, who in turn spent a fortune entertaining greats of the gas-lit era such as John L. Sullivan and Sarah Bernhardt.

Admonished over the way she spoiled Jack, Lotta said: "Jack is all I live for. I have no wants of my own."

This turned out to be obliquely untrue. For Lotta Crabtree, America's most famous actress of the time, gave unheralded sums to charities, to deserving, luckless people she knew. She endowed orphan-

ages and never turned away from those in real need. She was a quiet girl, a rather sad one. Her world was rich with wine and wealth, with wit and high intelligence, with casual love and sparkling ingenues, male and female. She lived with it, in it, but not of it; a very rare actress for her particular time.

Over the years of her success Lotta played to an adoring nation. The woman-starved miners had launched her, a paradoxical mother had sustained her and a worthless brother eventually died leaving in her a hollowness where love should have been. Of her father—he had never more than fulfilled an early biological function—there was only a vague shadow of memory, never strong. So, across the triumphant years walked Lotta Crabtree, famous, wealthy, loved, unloving, lonely.

She lived far beyond the times that greeted her with salvos of appreciation; into another century when other darlings were taken to the hearts of a brawling, boisterous nation. Lotta didn't die until 1924, many years after the Grande Ball announcing her retirement from the stage, in Buffalo, New York, 1891.

During the long years between retirement and death Lotta turned back to charity work. She had nothing but memories left. John Crabtree, a wraith lost somewhere in the silent yesterdays, was surely dead. No one knew where; no one cared. Mary Crabtree was also dead. Jack, the profligate brother, was gone too. Mart Taylor? Who knew; who cared? Of them all only Lotta remained. Of all the bearded miners of the Gold Rush, the silk-hatted boulevardiers, the lords and two-gun men, the great seas of faces, only those Lotta remembered still lived.

To her nearest relatives she bequeathed an annual income of twelve hundred dollars a year, a respectable sum in pre-income tax America. To the forgotten men and women of World War I she left an estate of two million dollars to be disbursed by especially picked administrators.

She died "the wealthiest actress the world has ever known." So wealthy, in fact, that when her will was presented for probabte ninety alleged relatives showed up to enter claims against her estate as being close blood ties. None succeeded, Lotta Crabtree's explicit instructions had left no loopholes. Her will was never broken and to this day its interest and principal, the foundations for which were laid three-quarters of a century before her death in gold dust, nuggets tossed at her feet at Grass Valley, continues to help those whom, alive, she would have helped personally.

Of her only love nothing is known and perhaps in this lies the finest tribute to a great woman—a *discreet* great woman.

TRIP TO DRAGOON SPRINGS

(Concluded from page 60)

with the toe of his boot. Heinman's gaze was dull and lifeless.

Tracy took the canteen and set out for the stage station at a steady dog trot, knowing that Helen would have heard shots and would be afraid. As he ran, he thought of her and when he came to the station he was smiling. It did something to his hard angular face. It softened it and gave it life.

He yelled when he was near and when he entered the compound, she was standing in the open doorway. She was crying, he saw with some amazement and then he saw that she was also laughing and he understood. He went directly to her and dropped the rifle and the canteen and took her in his arms and kissed her, hungrily now, needing the feel of her softness against him, needing the warmth of her arms around him.

She returned his kiss with a hunger equal to his own.

When she finally pushed back, he asked in wonder, "I was going to tell you that I love you, but you know, don't you?"

"Of course," she said simply. "Promise me something, Tracy. Promise me you'll never leave me again."

"I promise you," he said and dropped his mouth to meet hers, seeing the promise and warmth in her eyes.

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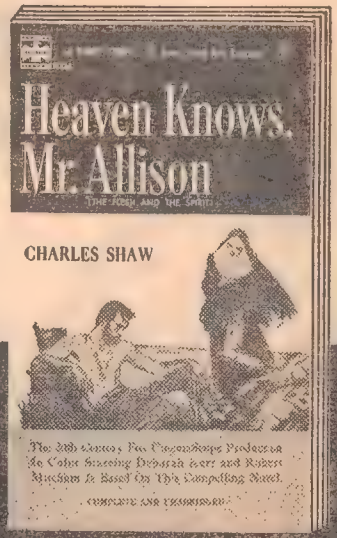

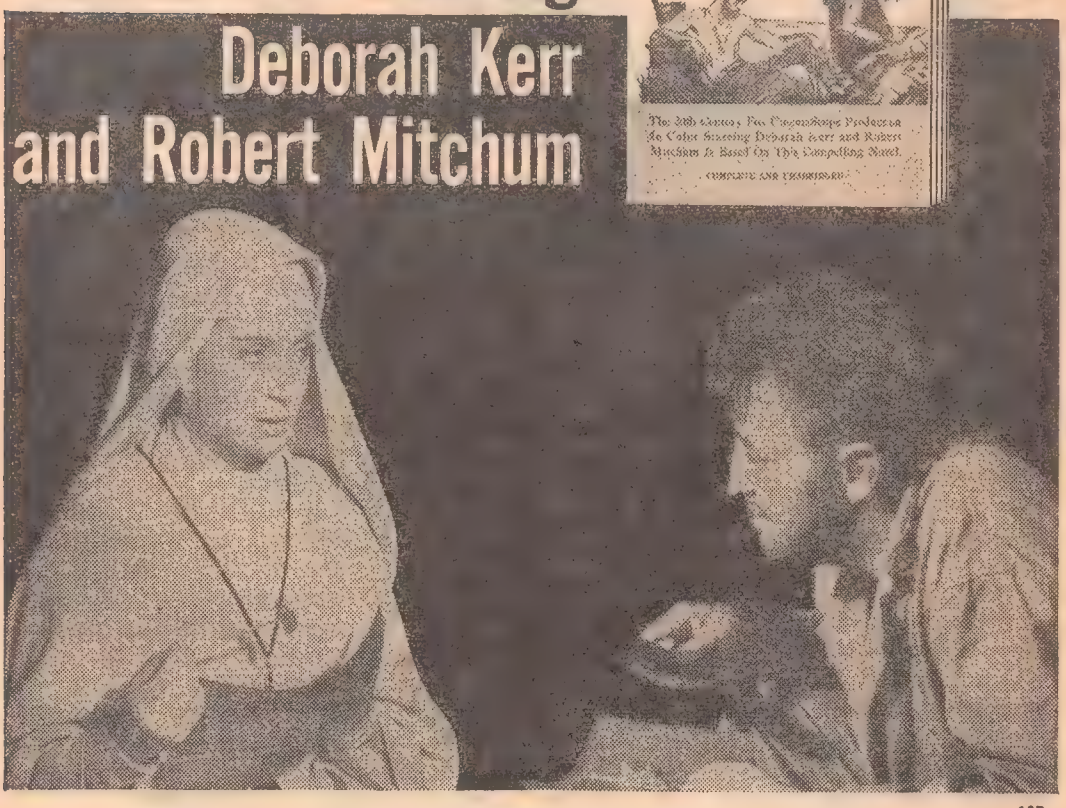

Deborah Kerr and Robert Mitchum in a scene from the 20th Century-Fox CinemaScope production in color of **"Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison."**

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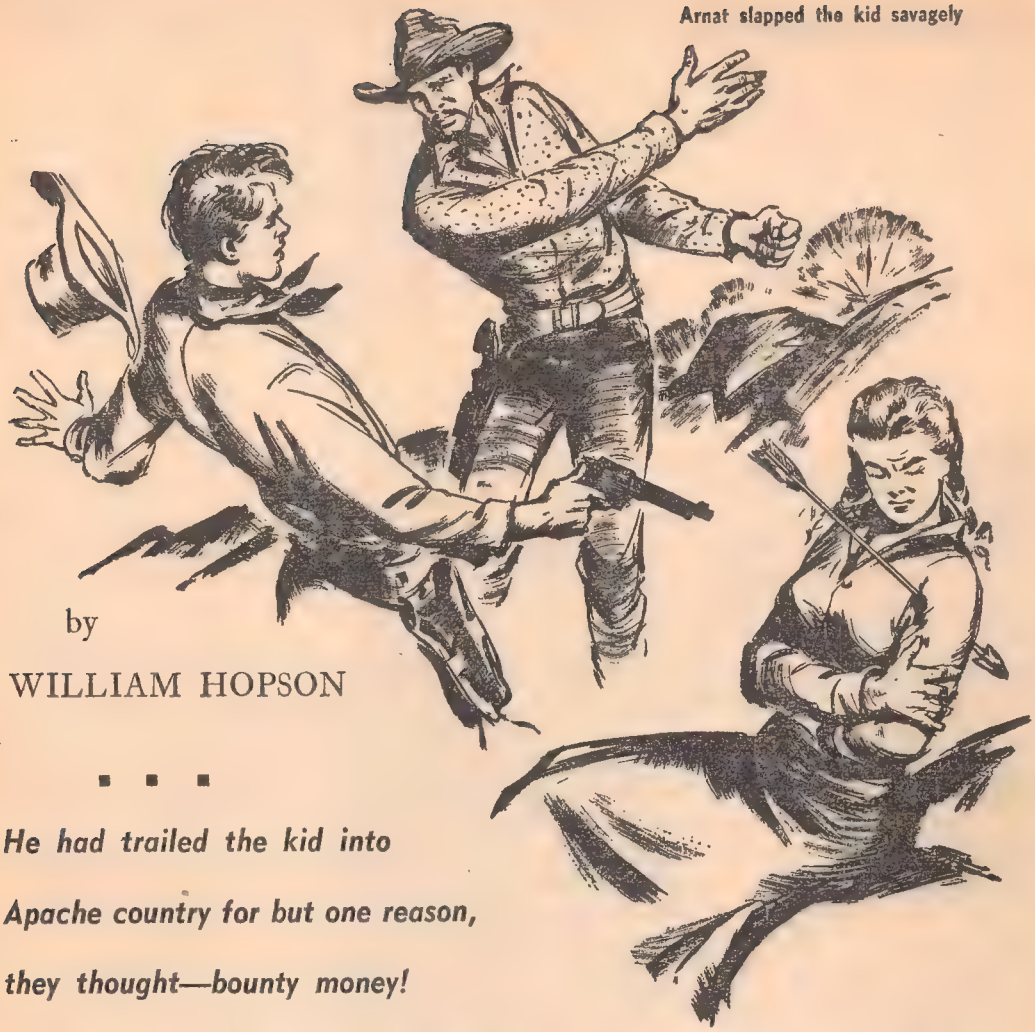

Arnat slapped the kid savagely

by

WILLIAM HOPSON

■ ■ ■

He had trailed the kid into Apache country for but one reason, they thought—bounty money!

LAWMAN'S REWARD

SAM ARNAT had arrived back across the Texas border with his prisoner from Old Mexico to find out about the holdup Jimmie had pulled, and to learn the kid had several days start—laughing probably, Sam thought, as he eluded the clumsy efforts of a town posse. Jimmie had always been a great one for laughing.

Because Sam was sheriff, he talked with them all—storekeepers and other well-meaning citizens unused to hard riding. Saddle sore and limping, they studied him with that question in their eyes: *What would Sam Arnat, once a professional man-tracker and now sheriff, do about a wild, laughing kid like Jimmie?*

Arnat thought about it again, better than a week later, as he crossed the desert almost at sundown and saw the old little settlement there among the trees at Cottonwood Springs, Arizona Territory. Not more than a dozen adobe buildings all told, and one big circular corral of more adobe. Apache proof, probably. With a big padlock.

A dusty cavalry patrol had told Sam, less than two hours before, that Chihuahua and his broncos had broken from the San Carlos Reservation and were hell bending toward the Mexican Border. Burning and killing as they went. The young lieutenant had lectured Sam Arnat severely about riding alone through the country, even if he was hunting a killer.

Arnat gave a final look down at the tracks of Jimmie's horse and then straightened his spare frame in the saddle and took up the slack on his lightly loaded pack horse. The kid had got here last night and might still be around. He'd told Jimmie's weeping mother he'd do everything possible to catch him, ride in on his gun, and then sit down and persuade him to return home and face what the law would hand out.

He rode the tired sorrel beneath the welcome shade of cottonwoods and went directly to the three main doorways in the only business building in the town. The first doorway was a miserable little hovel of a store. The second was a hole-in-the-wall saloon that would smell foully of stale tequila and mescal and the cheapest of whisky. The third doorway would be the end shed of a probable livery next to that Apache-proof corral. Nearby were a couple of brush *ramadas* high enough for a man to ride under if he bent a bit in the saddle.

In front of the saloon doorway Sam dropped a boot to the sand and heard the tired sorrel give a sigh of relief.

He stepped inside, into the stale odor of liquor, and stood quietly for a few moments, adjusting his eyes to the interior. Jimmie wasn't here, and what with the Border so close and Chihuahua and his band out raiding, he suddenly felt a bone ache go through his hips and spine. The same kind that posse back home in Texas had felt.

The short, crude bar from which emanated the odor of spilled liquor and sodden bar rags was deserted. The owner, an enormously fat man of thirty, sat on a keg watching a four-handed domino game between three men and a woman.

The woman was the first to speak. "Well?" she rasped.

"She's Big Maud and she's tough. Better speak up," the fat man said to Sam.

Sam Arnat had never seen a woman quite like her. She sat with brawny hands holding her dominoes, her man's brown shirt sleeves rolled to the elbows. Her brown hat was four-pinched into a sharp "Montana" peak, exactly like Sam's own. And if her broad, hard face had been blacker, and the twin braids of dirty yellow hair down her back were black, she'd have looked more like an Indian buck than a woman.

A coarse bull of a woman, weight about one-seventy-five.

The player to her right wore an apron that identified him as the probable storekeeper from next door. Skinny, bald, beak-nosed, he was about fifty. The man across from the woman, her partner in the game, looked out of place—middle-aged, blocky of build, clean-shaven and neatly dressed. He was, Sam Arnat pegged him, a good solid cowman who probably had a ranch somewhere back in the hills on a flowing, all-year creek.

The third player wore a derby and sat with it tipped back on his head, cigar in mouth and a big drink on the table. He was a bit unshaved and seedy, with several buttons gone from his city shoes. A goods drummer, Sam surmised. Too many towns where there'd been too many women and too many free drinks, and now he was at the end of the line.

They, in turn, saw a tired looking, gaunt-faced man of thirty-two, wearing a long drooping brown mustache partly obscuring his mouth. His eyes were a little more sunken than called for. He'd removed his brown hat with the sharp peak and was wiping at a forehead where his dark hair lay damply plastered against a hatline of white.

"The name is Sam Arnat," he said, and went over to the bar as the fat but powerful young owner waddled back of it.

Sam indicated a tequila bottle and then turned. "Where's the kid?" he asked. "Sleeping it off someplace, or has he high-

tailed it on south?"

"I'm Korman," the cowman said importantly, as though it meant something. "We know you."

"Gone on," the woman replied, and he saw her eyes studying him. They widened and then suddenly narrowed. "I sold him a fresh horse at noon today. He knifed a man in here last night, paid a Mexican woman to look after him till he got well again, then slept it off until noon and sloped out. He left word for you, Arnat. Said to tell you to give up and go back home."

"I was hoping he hadn't gone on," Sam replied. "The Apaches are out."

"The usual weekly scare," shrugged the woman. "Let's talk about that kid. You're Sam Arnat who hunted bounty in Texas. How much has this kid got on his head? Speak up!"

"I'm sheriff now," Sam said impatiently.

"Hah!" she snorted, and pushed back from the table, game forgotten. When she rose he saw the gunbelt at her ample, muscular hips, man-fashion, though she wore a leather riding skirt that smelled of the horses she bought, sold, and traded with no questions asked.

SHE looked at the others, who were staring at Sam. "Sheriff or no, he wouldn't have come this far and this long after a mere kid. He is, always has been, a man-tracker for money first. He's lying about the Apaches to keep us scared and forted up here while he goes on. I know his kind. I spent most of my life in Texas."

Sam downed the drink, paid for it and said to the storekeeper, "I'd like to get a few things for the trail."

The man in the dirty, grease-spotted apron rose, and Sam could have sworn the owl-like beak of a nose twitched as it smelled money. "Ain't got anything to sell you," he grunted, and hurried out the front door.

The fat owner of the place grinned. "You reckon that fool Bledway is getting ideas?" he asked, and laughed in a high-pitched giggle.

But Sam didn't hear any reply. He was already through the front door. He wanted to rest his horses and himself. No use going on tonight. He led the two patient animals around the corner toward the corral and saw the crude sign, *"Big Maud. Horses bought, sold, traded."*

He came face to face with Big Maud herself as he stepped out of a side doorway. He said, "If you've got any grain for sale—"

"Ain't got none," she snapped, and strode on by.

He thought, *even the woman will do her damnedest to squeeze you out.*

He made camp over among the cottonwoods, gave his horses the last of his grain supply and prepared a frugal camp meal. Within an hour he was asleep.

At four the following morning, just before summer daybreak, he was up and ready for the trail. He saw movement by the corral and rode over. Big Maud's figure outlined itself as she swung up into the saddle and turned to face him.

"That reward dead or alive?" she asked.

"I didn't say there was a reward."

"Hah!" she laughed. "Bledway said when he lit out last night it would be paid for him dead. Any reward is good hard money for pore folks like us, and you wouldn't come this far for less than a thousand. Not Sam Arnat. That's what I told 'em all last night."

"Not the rest of them, too?" he demanded.

"Naw," she said scornfully, and laughed. "Just Bledway and me. We're going to split the money." He knew then that she was lying.

She spurred away at a sharp trot and left him there to feel his way along until full daybreak broke. That poor, crazy kid! Heading for the border, across a desert and probably not even knowing where the waterholes were. Hunted individually by this rotten, money-mad bunch, out for the kill.

At ten that morning Sam saw the woman top a rise a quarter-mile ahead of him and rein around. She waved a rifle and he knew exactly what it meant. He'd have to face rifle fire or cut a long circle

around her.

Sam chose the circle, for time was running out for Jimmie now. That creature up there wasn't a woman. Not anymore. Whatever nature had given her in the way of a woman's instincts long since had been crushed under a layer of harsh self-destruction. And the ironical part of it was, she'd guessed right about the reward on Jimmie's head. It *was* a thousand dollars.

Sam Arnat, riding the chestnut and leading the lightly packed sorrel now, swung to the east and began his circling drive on south, gauging the speed and endurance of his horses against what must be held in reserve. And he wondered, if it came to the worst, how it would feel to have to shoot a woman?

Four miles farther on he caught a brief flash of green growing above the lip of a desert arroyo, the infallible sign of water. He slowed to a trot and swung over, and when he came out on the bank above he saw that another rider already was ahead of him. It was Bledway, and he'd just watered his horse and was ready to depart.

"You stay right up there!" the man yelled, his eyes wild back of his leveled rifle. "Don't you make a move till I git out of here!"

"You damned fool!" Sam Arnat called down softly. "I wouldn't dirty my hands on you. If God had ever given a buzzard your brains it would try to fly backwards. If you've got that many brains you'll dust out of here for home. I told you the Apaches are out!"

"You're lying!" yelled Bledway and wheeled his horse. "You're here!"

"Even if the Indians don't get you, I'm still the only man who can get near that kid. He's a wizard with a rifle. He'll drop you before you ever see him."

"Bah!" jeered the little storekeeper, and began drumming his heels into the side of the black horse. He lipped the ridge and was gone. Sam Arnat sat the chestnut and swore savagely.

He saw Bledway and Big Maud join up an hour or so later, and then lost them, or thought he had, until around two that afternoon. Then he saw them about three-quarters of a mile to the west, on a saguaro-studded knoll in the desert. There was a third party now, the fat saloon-keeper, and Sam could only breathe his rage and disgust. He was beyond swearing at their greed, their willingness to kill ruthlessly, their stupidity in taking a chance on being cut down by Apaches.

The two of them had joined the dive owner. His name was Surrat, Sam remembered having overheard in the adobe. Then all three disappeared again, hard on Jimmie's trail.

He crossed the Mexican Border over into the wastes of the Sonore Desert somewhat late that afternoon. He'd now been cutting his circle for several hours while they followed the kid's easy trail, and it was time to take the lead. Black lava crests hunched above the dry desert floor like the raised spines on the back of a giant iguana.

SAM ARNAT hauled up long enough to change saddle and pack-saddle, and after a drink from his waterbag he mounted. He was now riding the sorrel again. He had to be ahead of them.

Twenty minutes later he found out how tough heading them was going to be. Although they led no horses for a quick change of saddles, they must have been riding the best the woman had in her corral. Sam realized this when he strained his two horses up a rise, fighting through rocks and grubby desert vegetation, thinking he might now be ahead of them—only to have a bullet scream past his face as he reached the top.

He saw Big Maud jerk the repeater down, whip in another shell, and the rifle go to her hard shoulder again. He heard the *carr-umph* of the bullet as it whumpet into his mount even as the weapon crashed out its second report.

The sorrel gave a plaintive cry, not as though in pain, but a sorrowful whimper as though in protest that man would do this to an animal that had only tried to do its best. Arnat kicked his feet free and

leaped clear as the horse went down. It rolled over twice on the slope, half pushed itself up on its forelegs, and then stretched its feet out.

It lay like a dog with head outstretched between its forelegs. The legs quivered briefly and then were still. Sam automatically had held onto the lead rope of the chestnut, and now as he plunged with it down out of sight he heard the woman's triumphant yell.

He also noted that somebody else had joined the party. They had Korman with them now. A prosperous ranch owner who couldn't resist blood money.

He got the saddle off the dead sorrel, jerked the pack free of the chestnut and put it on. It took him brief minutes to jerk a few food supplies out of the pack and into a slicker roll, cantle tie it, and mount. He spurred out of there, leaving behind a fine horse now buzzard bait, and the thought instinctively caused him to look up and sweep the surrounding sky with his eyes.

He didn't see a buzzard, but he caught sight of a pinpoint fluttering in the sky so far away he barely could identify it, but he knew. It was a hawk, and it was *hovering!*

A low flying hawk that soared along was hunting. A circling hawk was loafing. A hovering hawk was *watching!*

Somebody or something was over behind that line of cacti-studded hummocks east of him, and the thought of what it could be sent a cold chill down into Sam Arnat's guts. He couldn't circle to the east anymore—that damned vicious woman's rifle had him cut off.

And if Sam's suspicions were correct, there would be more Apaches over to the west. Out of sight in the desert, pacing them, letting them all work deeper into the trap.

Those raiders who'd broken off the reservation had followed time-tested custom of hitting straight and hard to the sanctuary of the Border, where American cavalry troops could pursue them no farther.

They were across now, Chihuahua and his broncos, and by some particular twist of fate, they'd landed a nice easy windfall. Several men and a woman on the trail of still another White Eye fleeing ahead of them. That was Sam's guess, and he had the terrible, sickening feeling in his belly that that guess was all too accurate.

They were being funnelled into a deadly Apache trap from which there would be no escape. And because of that woman up there with the rifle, he couldn't even get close enough to warn them!

A break appeared ahead, a thin belt of dry flat sand against a ten-foot bluff—an arrayo cut out by flash floods. If that arrayo ran straight and far enough Sam could drive south between the group and the unseen Apaches and still get to the kid to warn him before, holed up somewhere down there ahead, he might start picking them off with his own long gun.

Sam put the chestnut to the spur and began a hammering gallop into the arroyo, not wanting to do this to a good horse in such heat but feeling he had no other choice. He hadn't pushed two miles farther on until he saw the rider ahead. He didn't say a word. Neither did the man in the derby hat as Sam pulled up his panting mount.

"Even you, too?" he finally asked.

"Me, too," said the man, and took off his derby. He wiped at his forehead with a dirty blue satin shirt sleeve from days when store owner customers had come first and a liquor glass and the fragrance of a woman's perfume for dessert.

"The name is Horace Stolby. I was the first to slip out last night early. Made good time, too, until the moon went down and the bottle gave out. You got a drink on you?"

"No," snapped Arnat shortly. "But I've some advice. Get that horse you probably rented from Big Maud last night right up under a cut bank. Hold him by the reins until dark and pray. Then get back to where you came from. I think we've got visitors. Apaches!"

Stolby said tiredly, almost without interest, "I can't pray and I'm too afraid to try alone." He put on the derby again

and gave Arnat a wan smile, and somehow Sam felt sorry for this unshaved derelict.

"It's not," Horace Stolby explained, "that I'm afraid to die. I'm past that. I used to have an office in the Studebaker wagon works. I left it and a wife and four children because I couldn't resist the sway of a woman's hips as she crossed a ballroom floor one night ten years ago. The road downhill to the bottom has been a long one—but not without certain compensations such as that woman—and I won't be hypocrite enough now to whimper regrets. So I'm not afraid to die. I just don't want to do so alone, in the dark."

HIS eyes had a look in them somehow reminiscent of the way the sorrel horse had looked at Sam Arnat just as it lowered its outstretched head between its forelegs and died.

"Come on," Sam Arnat ordered gruffly. "Good heavens, you didn't even bring a rifle, just that weird seven or eight shot thing sticking out of your waistband! Were you going to sneak up on a wildcat like Jimmie?" Sam swore bitterly again and led off once more along the floor of the arroyo.

He wanted to go back the other way. Take this man he suddenly pitied and burn the breeze away to the north and leave the others to whatever fate the Apaches' gods decreed.

But he couldn't. He couldn't go back and face his step-mother and tell her he'd turned his back in the face of the Apaches and not made a final try to save his young kid stepbrother, her only son.

He twisted in the saddle again and looked back, surprised that Stolby was holding up exceptionally well for a man gone to seed on booze. The man probably had ridden much in former years.

At the end of three miles the arroyo inevitably fell victim to the desert's flat terrain. It ended quite abruptly as Sam and Horace Stolby rounded a shallow turn and saw where raging waters had spread wide and lost their power to cut banks. Waters slowed down, grown thin, and saw for the last time the sky which had dropped them before the sand sucked them greedily down into the ground below.

Sam's eyes caught movement to the right. About a quarter-mile ahead and to the right three riders had bunched on a knoll and were screaming warnings. Big Maud, the toad figure of Surrat, and a cowman who should have gone on home. But where was Bledway?

Sam had no time to think when Stolby's scream of warning came from back behind. He whirled in the saddle and saw them coming in hard, lean, dark-visaged figures on their wiry ponies. They had streaks of white bottom clay under their eyes and they were wearing bright colored headbands.

He'd heard of these men General Crook had called the tigers of the human race. Now a cold fear he couldn't control went through him as he reached down and jerked his repeating rifle from its saddle boot. Some of the Indians were armed with guns, others with bows. What were they screaming? *Zastee! Zastee!* Probably their word for kill.

Sam Arnat began slamming .44-.40's as fast as he could into the group. He heard the boom of single shot blunderbuses and the swish of arrows. Something struck into his saddle fork with a thud and as he went to his belt loops for more cartridges he saw that the object was an arrow.

He broke off the arrow with a slap of his hand, and the chestnut covered two hundred lung pounding yards before he was reloaded and twisted around again. He almost wished he hadn't looked back.

Stolby's horse, borrowed or rented from Big Maud, was down. Whether it had stumbled or been slammed with an arrow or bullet, Arnat would never know. He saw the man who'd thrown away everything for another woman running remarkably fast in old button shoes, his derby gone. Stolby ran for maybe a few yards, just enough to give the warriors some sport. Two of them, fierce visaged as eagles, swooped by with lances and the three of them went down in a cloud of

dust like a mountain lion pulling down a deer on an almost miss.

One of the warriors didn't get up. Arnat had that satisfaction as he went to his belt loops a second time. He spurred on toward the group out there and this time Big Maud's rifle didn't whump a bullet into his remaining horse.

He reined up and wheeled his horse, which stood panting so convulsively Arnat rocked back and forth in the saddle. He looked at them all; the woman, the barrel shaped dive owner who overflowed his saddle, and most keenly of all at Korman the rancher.

He said, "These others I can figure. But you I can't. I'd like to know why you went mad, too?"

"Thought it was my duty," muttered Korman and he flushed. He looked down there to where the Apaches were after Stolby's body with lances, mutilating it in their classical way.

"I'd say for the moment that we're safe," Arnat said. "They've got us and know it. They just wanted some sport with a couple of us stragglers. Well, let's get out of here. I've got to get to that boy."

"Which way?" asked Surrat, all the color gone from his face.

"Where else but on south?" Arnat said curtly. "I'm going to bring up the rear from a quarter-mile. I got three of them and they'll respect me. Move out, and if you run into the kid's rifle just remember that you asked for it. Nobody invited you here."

"Don't remind us of something we already know!" Surrat cried out. His eyes watched the now leisurely loping Apaches fade into the distance eastward. "We were heading for a waterhole I used when I pack trained my liquor in from Old Mexico."

"That's why they didn't come in on us from both sides," Sam Arnat said. "The other half of them are up there to cut us off. That country up ahead looks rough enough to fort up in. It's our best bet at the moment."

He let them get ahead, to become the main target of attack if another one came, to risk the rifle fire of a kid they'd as soon take dead as alive. But the Apaches' medicine seemed to be working good that fateful day.

A MILE farther on Sam Arnat rounded a promontory and came suddenly upon the group. And on the ground, bound hand and foot, lay Jimmie. He was laughing as though somebody had played a big joke upon him.

"Hi, there, old sad face," he said in greeting to the man whose father had married his mother. "That bottle I bought from the fat boy and brought along made me sleepy. Old Owl Nose there—" Jimmie canted his head toward Bledway sitting on a rock— "had me tied before I knew what was going on."

Big Maud had been laughing, perhaps in relief, but likely in temporary exultation. Now it stopped and she swung the muzzle of the deadly repeater up toward Sam.

"He's our boy now, Arnat. You keep hands off!" she ordered.

"Cut me loose, Sam, and gimme a gun," Jimmie said, a smile on his lips. "I'll run this bunch clean back to their stinking buzzards' nest where they sit around waiting for their prey. Me, this time!" Jimmie laughed again. "Hey, how much am I worth anyhow, Sammy?"

Sam said, swinging down, "It's no matter now, kid. They won't collect." He strode over and looked down at Jimmie, shook his head sadly.

"Look!" whispered Korman. He didn't get up, he didn't appear to have strength enough anymore. "I've lived in this country most of my life, Arnat. I know these tigers and what they do when they catch victims!"

Big Maud got up, ignoring the others and shaded her hand to look at the watching vedettes all around on the skyline. Then suddenly, swung the rifle down at the bound figure of the youngster. An animal screem came from her as she pulled the trigger.

Sam knocked the barrel aside and wrenched it out of her hands. He bent

down and used his jackknife to cut Jimmie free. Then he handed the big coarse woman her rifle.

"We'll need every gun in this outfit, Maud—against them. This place is as good as any to hole up. Bledway, get up on a boulder above and take first watch."

He loosed his cinch and Jimmie came over.

"How'd Mom take it?" the boy asked.

"About Lon's wife and kids? How'd you expect?" Sam said curtly. "Why did you do it, kid? What got into you, Jimmie?"

"Oh, that saloon bunch was sneaking me drinks, like usual, to have some fun. They dared me to hit the bank. When I went in Lon told me I was drunk and to go on home or he'd paddle me. He grabbed the barrel of my gun and it went off and caught him in the belly. I sobered quick then, grabbed all the cash in sight, and ran fast."

Korman came over as Jimmie walked soberly away. The rancher wiped at his square face with a sleeve.

Sam said, "You know these people. Do they attack at night?"

Korman said, "You're used to Texas and the Comanches. They are the only night fighters among all Indian tribes. These boys have to wait until just before daybreak and give the peaceful ghosts of their dead time to get back to the abode."

Surrat stood up with an empty bottle in one hand and flung it against a rock. "Anybody got any water? My canteen's dry. It's hell when you drink this foul stuff and then ain't got no water afterward."

He caught the looks and silence for his reply and turned away.

Darkness came down and a ring of night fires pin pointed the darkness all around them. Shrill barking, which sounded like coyotes, broke out. Sam Arnat ate jerky beef. Surrat sucked a small pebble in an agony of thirst. Big Maud sat and stared savagely at Jimmie, who was sober and thoughtful now for one so young. Korman was up on top on watch and the horses stood huddled below.

Then suddenly Sam came to his feet. "Listen!" he cried out sharply.

It came from the south, rawhide shod ponies that had come up in the night. Even as Sam rose the air was torn apart by yells, barkings, yappings, screeches—the kind of sound that an ordinary cow horse didn't understand and therefore went terror stricken. A roar of hoofs swept by and Sam stood there slamming away with his six-shooter as the wave went on down a slight draw and was gone. Where the horeses had stood was only emptiness now.

Sam heard a grunt and turned to look at Big Maud. She stood with the feathered end of an arrow shaft protruding from her right shoulder. She began to curse, with just a faint touch of shrillness beginning to edge into her voice. Some buck hadn't been quite so superstitious.

"Somebody take this damn arrow outa me," she groaned as she sat down.

Jimmie came up and grinned down at her. "Looks like I sure fixed you up, didn't I, sister? You still want that reward? How much is she gonna get for me, Sammy?"

Arnat slapped him across the mouth, savagely, and then went to the woman. He cut the shaft with his knife, toppled her forward at the waist, hooked two fingers around the sheet iron head, and pulled the cut shaft through from behind her thick shoulder.

Korman slid down from up above.

"That'll be all until daybreak, and then we're finished," he said calmly. "You better hope that arrow is poisoned, Maud." He turned to Arnat, and said, "They dip 'em in rotted deer livers in which poisonous insects have been ground."

"Like Comanches." Arnat nodded. "You still feel it was your duty to come? I'm just plain curious?"

"I'm mortaged to the hilt from gambling losses from Tucson to El Paso," the stocky man said bitterly. "My wife gave me a year when she left; to get my head level. She's coming back next week. I figured the kid for a thousand reward, and I had to have it for a final desperate attempt to recoup. When I saw Apache smoke I

joined the others."

Surrat stood up and slung a canteen over his shoulder. "I've got to have water," he whispered. "Anybody going to try stopping me?"

Arnat said curtly, "You came along on your own. You're entitled to try to escape alone. But I'd wait for the moon to go down if I were you."

Surrat licked at his cracked lips and his eyes pleaded for just one drink of water he wouldn't have given to Stolby had that unfortunate man escaped and been here with the same burning thirst. He sat down and the moon finally went down and sometime during the night Surrat crawled out. Sam saw him go and never saw him again.

IN the early morning hours Big Maud's iron willed stoicism finally gave way and she began to give off faint grunts, louder with each passing minute. Suddenly she was up on her booted feet, a six-shooter in her left hand, screaming and wild-eyed.

"Where is he? Where's that dirty little kid who got us—"

Arnat plunged at her and half knocked her down, and later she merely moaned and spoke of two husbands she'd killed, one of them by poison which nobody in Texas suspected. Arnat went to her and placed a hand on her forehead and gave her a drink of water from his canteen.

He heard a running sound and wheeled around. "Jimmie! Come back here, you crazy young fool!"

But Jimmie's answer was a mocking laugh from the darkness below. "Not me, Sammy! If I stay here I die, if I go home I hang or rock pile at Huntsville pen. But when you can't lick 'em join 'em! I got it figured out. They like young fellows like me. I'll ride with 'em awhile and then—"

His voice was cut off, gurgling as a hand muffled it. A half-hour later Sam heard him scream over there in the night. When Jimmie began to scream again Sam Arnat sat down on a rock and put his hands over his ears. Nobody spoke for a long time, and even Big Maud was silent. Korman finally broke the silence.

"Speaking of curiosity, Arnat, how much *was* on the kid?"

"A thousand as you all guessed," Sam admitted. "I wanted to bring my stepbrother home to his mother and give the reward to the widow and two children of a dead bank teller. And it *was* dead or alive."

"Stepbrother!" Bledway cried out, almost in horror. "Good, God! Why didn't you tell us."

Sam Arnat gave him a cold look, then got to his feet. He walked off, shifting the repeater, then looked back at their dim forms huddled among the rocks. He said, "The coyotes are getting louder and closer. I'd rather try a rush now for that wash down below while its black night. Anybody coming?"

He heard Big Maud spit out the bullet she'd had clamped between her teeth to keep back the groans. "Help me up, Arnat. If I'd married a real man like you instead of those two bums I got rid of, I wouldn't be here. There, I can walk now. You lead. We'll follow."

They crept out of the rocks and down in single file, Sam Arnat leading the way. The desert floor came up to meet them and they slid down a cut bank with a too loud rattle of pebbles and began to creep along the sandy bottom. A dark object loomed up almost in front of Sam's eyes and he reached out to feel it. It was Surrat, pin cushioned with arrows.

Arnat crawled around it and heard Bledway whimper softly, "Oh, God, God, be merciful to me now."

And apparently God did so for the hard snap of bow strings, the whistle and the thud of arrows cut off the rest of it from where Bledway had been bringing up the rear. Arnat leaped to his feet and began to run as cries filled the night.

A gun boomed close by and he shot at and into the flash with his rifle, then swung it hard as another Apache leaped out at him and was halted in mid-air. He heard Big Maud yelling and the futile grunts as Korman struggled in the arms

of a half dozen of them. But he couldn't help them now. He ran on.

A deep, narrow wash little wider than his body opened up in the eight foot high bank. Sam Arnat, seeing better in the dark now, paused to crash all the shots from his rifle and pistol into that struggling mass of humanity back there before he pushed in. He felt his way in deeper and came to the place where water erosion first had started to cut a baby gully into the main one.

There he paused with dirt and the sweat of fear damp on his gaunt face and reloaded. He heard the pound of rawhide soled moccasins, and maybe they had cat eyes because several of them were jammed up at the entrance, yelling with their blood hot for the kill.

In the close confines of the narrow-walled in crevice Sam Arnat's six-shooter gave off smashing roars again and again until it was empty and those not piled up lax at the opening were gone running.

He crawled out and began to walk southward again. He didn't know anyplace else to go.

When daylight came he sat down among the rocks and with red rimmed eyes looked back a couple of miles to where two faint tendrils of smoke lifted to the sky. He knew then that when he had emptied his guns into the struggling mass of human beings there in the sand floored gulley that he hadn't been able to kill Big Maud and Korman, as he had hoped. Apache bodies had taken the slugs and kept the prisoners alive.

Sam Arnat wiped at his grimy face with a hand and ran it over his head and thought, *hell, I've lost my hat. It's going to be hot today and they're in no hurry. They've got plenty of time. They know I'm afoot and without water, but I still got a few shells left.*

He got up and walked on and only once did he look back again at the two smoke tendrils. Yes, he thought again, he had plenty of time. The Apaches didn't scalp. They hung a person—or two people—by their ankles and then built a slow fire . . .

When Sam saw the approaching cavalry patrol coming up the swale in a column of twos, still following Chihuahua's tracks through special permission to cross the border, he thought for a moment that the heat was getting to his bare head. He stood with rifle butt grounded between rock scratched boots as the officer, ramrod straight, halted his men and dismounted. He gave Sam a non-military salute.

"Oh, so its you?" he said severely. "Don't you civilians in this country *ever* learn to stay home at a time like this?"

"Reckon some don't," Sam Arnat said. "If you're still hunting Chihuahua and his bunch they're back there a few miles. Finishing up some work and making a tally of their dead. Pretty heavy for them. No loss on our side. I'll keep on walking until you come back."

He went on walking as the column pounded by him with a rattle of accoutrements an Apache could hear for a half mile. By the time those troopers got there they'd find nothing but two figures swinging head down by their ankles.

Sam Arnat strode on north toward the border.

He'd come after Jimmie and he'd found him. He'd go on back home and collect his reward and give it to Lon's family.

He didn't know yet what he was going to tell his stepmother.

MAIL-ORDER

Will Hughes wanted no part of a man like Pollack,

but he knew Mary Bess couldn't fight him off alone

BRIDE

By J. L. BOUMA

NEAR noon, Will Hughes finished stretching the new canvas hood over the bows of the Contestoga wagon. He was a tall man burned dark, and his bleached work shirt clung wetly against his broad shoulders. Behind him, the door of the adobe station opened, and he turned as Mrs. Hawley stepped outside and shaded her eyes.

"Looks fine," she said. "Reminds me of the time we made the trek along the old Santa Fe trail. Good Lord, if I was thirty years younger I'd set my cap for you and go with you, Will."

Will's strong white teeth flashed in a grin. "You're welcome to come along. You can keep house for me and Dan."

Mrs. Hawley, a middle-aged woman of vast proportions, chuckled deep in her throat. "You don't want an old work horse like me along. What you need is a sturdy young woman, one who'll laugh her way through life with you."

"I'll start looking for her when I get to Colorado."

Will used a bandana to mop sweat from his face and neck. A mid-summer sun hammered this desert country, and heat waves blurred the yellow land in all directions. A range of distant hills wavered against the brassy sky.

Will gazed along the dusty stage road, then squinted briefly at the sun. "The stage is late."

"Not by more'n five minutes."

"Here it comes now."

Will had heard the distant sound of hoof and wheel, and he turned immediately to harness six of the big horses that stood with swishing tails in the shade of the open shed at one end of the corral. He had them ready when the stage rolled into the yard and stopped with a squeal of brakes and hot dust.

Hatch tied his lines and climbed down from the box as Will came to unhitch the snorting, foam-flecked horses. Hatch, a bandy-legged man with a walrus mustache, winked at Will.

He said, "You're gonna have company," and opened the stage door.

A woman alighted, a pale young woman of perhaps twenty-one or two, dressed in rumpled gingham. A small ridiculous hat with a single drooping feather was perched on her fair hair. She seemed bewildered and upset, as though events had crowded her to the point where she had lost confidence in herself.

For a moment she and Will stared at each other. Then Will smiled. "You'll want to freshen up, I reckon. Mrs. Hawley'll take care of you inside."

"Then you're Mr. Pollack?" she said

shyly. "Wesley Pollack?"

Will grunted softly. "No, ma'am. I'm Will Hughes, in charge of this station."

"I'm sorry," she murmured in a scarcely audible voice, and tried unsuccessfully to smile. "I suppose I shouldn't have expected Mr. Pollack to meet me. I'm a day early, you see."

Hatch said, "She got in on the train day before yesterday and took the last stage out. I reckon Pollack figured her to spend the night in Bisbee and take the morning stage. Makes her a day ahead of her schedule."

Will nodded. He said shortly, "You're welcome to stay over, ma'am."

"I'm Mary Bess," she said.

"Pleased to meet you," Will said.

She smiled hesitantly, then took a straw suitcase from the coach and said, "Thank you," to Hatch before she went to the house. Hatch chuckled and climbed to the roof of the stage and unlashed the Saratoga trunk that was tied there. Will reached up and took hold of the handles with his muscular hands and carried it inside the door. When he came back, Hatch guffawed softly.

"Thought you was Pollack and looked plumb down in the mouth when she found out you wasn't. Now if that ain't a good one."

"What does she want with Pollack?"

"What do you think?"

"Yeah," Will said glumly, and went to work unhitching the horses. But his mind was on Wes Pollack, whose reputation was such in the country that no woman in her right mind would consider marrying him.

Pollack had a sheep ranch a good fifteen miles into the hills, in the direction of the Tumacacori Mission. He had killed his first wife with hard work, and worse, and after that had taken to advertising in such publications as printed ventures in matrimony. The first woman to answer and fall into his trap, had followed her predecessor to the grave within a year, and the second one had turned into a sniveling wreck before she left him and got a divorce.

Will worked swiftly, anger coursing through him at the thought. If this Mary Bess had any sense she'd take one look at Pollack and head back where she came from, or else Pollack would ruin her in no time at all.

Hatch came from the house to help Will back the fresh team into the traces. He studied the big Contestoga wagon, and said, "When are you leaving?"

"Next week."

"Colorado's a far piece. You ever been there?"

"I was raised on a ranch near Durango. When my brother Dan got out of the Army last year, he went back there and bought a place, and some cattle. He's been after me to join him, and I'm raring to go. I'm sick of sand and sage, and hankering for grass and running water and shade trees."

THEY finished hitching the horses, and Hatch climbed to the box. He saluted Will with his popper and drove out of the yard. Will rubbed the sweating horses down, then curried and fed them; and he had just about finished when Mrs. Hawley came from the house, her mouth stiff, eyes angry.

"Do you know that that poor girl—" she began.

Will nodded. "It's her business," he said shortly.

"Well, it's a shame. She's a nice girl, a real nice girl, too good for the likes of Pollack. He sent her the fare money and that's all. She won't admit it, but I'll swear she ain't had a bite to eat in the last couple of days. That's why she took the first stage she could catch out of Bisbee, on account of she didn't have the money for a room."

"Too bad," Will said. "Where's she from?"

"Kansas City, Missouri. She got out of an orphanage about a year ago and was working as a domestic when she read Pollack's advertisement and wrote to him. Her fool head's full of dreams, poor child."

"It won't take Pollack long to knock 'em out of her."

"Somebody oughta take and whip that

man to a frazzle."

"It's not our business," Will said tonelessly. "Did you feed her?"

"Lord yes! She ate like a working cow hand. Fatten her up a little and she'd be right pretty."

Will grunted. "I reckon I could drive her over to Pollack's place this afternoon."

"Oh, no you don't!" Mrs. Hawley said. "She ain't spending the night at his house if I can help it. Tomorrow's Sunday, and he's likely got it planned to take her to the mission to face the padre, before he takes her home." She paused, added grimly, "He'd better not have anything else in mind."

An hour later, Mr. Hawley called Will for dinner. Mary Bess, she said, was taking a nap. Will ate quickly, then went to the barn and spent the afternoon making the boxes and crates that would hold his possessions. He had accumulated a lot during the four years he had been at the station—personal gear, odds and ends of furniture, saddles and harness and various items of hardware that would prove useful on the ranch. He was nailing a box together when Mary Bess entered the barn and stopped to watch him. Will smiled at her.

"Did you have a good sleep?" he asked.

"Yes, thanks." Her cheeks were flushed with color, and her air of bewilderment had vanished. "I couldn't seem to sleep on the stage," she said shyly. "I'm not used to it, I guess."

"Some of the roads are pretty rough, and a lot of folks get stage sick."

She looked around at the unfinished boxes and crates, at the pile of cut boards. "Mrs. Hawley said you were going to Colorado. I've read a lot about that State. It must be wonderful, the mountains and all."

"It's real nice country," Will said. He sat on the box, hefting his hammer, a tall, bronzed young man with hair black as an Apache's. "Real nice country," he repeated. "Plenty of good hunting and fishing, and I'm looking forward to both."

She went to a box and sat down and looked at her hands. "Is it nice where Mr. Pollack is located?"

"Didn't he write you about his place?"

"Oh, yes. He said he raised sheep, but he didn't have much to say about the country."

"Well, it's pretty barren. No good for cattle at all, but sheep will eat just about anything."

She looked up quickly, a strained expression around her mouth. "And Mr. Pollack. Is he nice?"

"Why ask me?" Will said shortly.

She flushed. "Because of something Mrs. Hawley said. She said Mr. Pollack has been married three times."

"Didn't he write and tell you?"

She shivered slightly and shook her head. "No, but I guess it's all right. He sounded nice in his letters. A little strict, but then—" She broke off, then added in a low voice, "I wanted more than anything else to come West."

Will watched her hands work in her lap, noting that they were red and rough from work.

He said gently, "Didn't you like it in Kansas City?"

She bit her lip. "It was all right, but nobody knew I existed. I was one of half a dozen maids in a big house, and it got so I felt like a piece of furniture. The mister and his wife used to argue and say awful things to each other right in front of me, like I was a dog or something that couldn't understand."

Her voice turned toneless and brittle. "I worked in that house over a year, and the mister never learned my name. Whenever he wanted something he used to say, 'You there,' or 'Hey, girl.' I wanted more out of life than what I had." She went on after a short pause. "A house of my own, a kitchen, a parlor where my husband and I could sit in the evenings." She sighed and looked up. "I'm sorry, I'm talking too much."

Something wrenched in Will. "It's your right, and don't ever forget it." He paused. "I guess we all want more than we've got. It's nice to think about, anyway."

She rose. "Well, I hope Mr. Pollack likes me," she said uncertainly.

Will looked at her. She had put on a fresh dress, and he noted the slim, yet sturdy lines of her young body. "He will," he said, and turned angrily back to his work.

SUPPER was a companionable meal, during which Will spoke of his forthcoming trek to Colorado. "I mean to take my time and get a good look at the country I pass through. Be my last chance to fiddlefoot, I reckon, and I want to work the itch out of my heels before I settle down."

Mrs. Hawley gave Mary Bess a meaningful look. "I told Will this afternoon that if I was thirty years younger I'd set my cap for him and go along."

Mary Bess blushed lightly. "Mr. Pollack mentioned a mission in his letters. Is it close by?"

"It's a small Mexican settlement about ten miles west of his place." A harshness came into Will's voice. "I expect you'll be married there tomorrow evening."

Mrs. Hawley looked from him to the girl, her gaze sharp. "Don't you go making your mind up just like that, you hear? There's no need to marry him at once. It would be better if you—"

"Please," the girl murmured. "It isn't right for us to talk about Mr. Pollack when he's not here. Anyway, we agreed to be married the day I arrived." A hard, small pride crept into her voice. "I want our marriage to be a success, and I mean to do everything I can to make it a success."

A surge of bitterness swept through Will at her words. Leave it to her, and her marriage would be a success, he thought. The only trouble was that she'd have next to nothing to say around Pollack, a fact she would learn before another week had passed.

In silence, he left the table and fired his pipe and went out to stroll around while the girl helped Mrs. Hawley with the dishes. When he came back to the big front room, he heard the tinkling notes of the music box, and found Mary Bess listening closely, her face radiant.

"A Stephen Foster tune," she murmured. "Isn't it lovely?"

"Sure is."

Mrs. Hawley appeared briefly in the kitchen doorway. "Nice tune to dance to. Why don't you two try it?"

Mary Bess glanced hesitantly at Will, her eyes confused. "I never learned to dance properly."

Will smiled. "I'm not much of a hand myself, but there's no harm in trying."

He put his pipe away and moved the table from the room's center, then came up and put an arm around her. Her small, flushed face was directly below his, and her eyes were shining. They waltzed slowly around the floor, and when the music stopped and they stepped apart, they found themselves laughing.

"It was wonderful," she said abruptly. "I've never had such a good time or been happier."

Will swallowed, and his laughter ceased. He said gruffly, "Let's try it again," and went over to rewind the music box. They danced the music out once more, and by then Will realized that the girl was very tired. She said as much.

"I'll go to bed now, if you don't mind. Tomorrow's bound to be an exciting day."

"I reckon so," Will said tonelessly.

She went to the kitchen then, and spoke to Mrs. Hawley, and Will pushed the table back to its proper place and absently stoked his pipe, thinking exciting wasn't exactly the proper word. But it would be a day to remember all right, and as Will got ready for bed he wondered how it would turn out.

WES POLLACK arrived at the station directly after the noon stage pulled out of the yard. He drove up in his aged buckboard behind a gaunt team of horses, a fleshy, red-faced man in a worn mackinaw that reeked of sheep dip. Will wondered fretfully how the man could stand to wear the heavy coat in this heat, but he knew Pollack was never without it. He watched Pollack step down, a big, heavy, arrogant man, who said without ceremony, "I'm expecting a woman. Did she come in on the stage?"

"She came in yesterday."

Pollack scowled. "Yesterday?"

"That's right." Will explained what had happened, and Pollack grunted.

"Was your housekeeper here last night?"

Will said softly, "If you mean what I think you do, you'd better watch your tongue, Pollack."

"All right, forget it."

"You planning to take the girl out to the mission right away?"

Pollack's gaze narrowed. "That's what I had in mind, if you want details." He was a sneering, unlikeable man, and there were few in the country who had any use for him. "Anything else you want to know about my business?" he demanded roughly.

Mrs. Hawley was right, Will thought. Somebody ought to whip him to a frazzle. But Mary's got enough ahead of her without that, so I'd best let it hang.

In a low voice he said, "This is one girl you're gonna treat right, Pollack. Because if you don't I'll be after you."

Pollack's grin was ugly. "She must be a right nice filly." Then, in a sudden burst of furious anger, "Don't threaten me, Hughes. And keep your long nose outa my business. I sent for the girl, not you. And I'm the one that's gonna marry her. Remember that."

He strode past Will then, and shouldered into the house. Will followed slowly and found Pollack talking to the girl as Mrs. Hawley looked on with disapproval.

Mary's face was quite ashen; the old bewilderment was back in her eyes, and something else—a sort of desperate pleading. Pollack was grinning loosely at her, obviously pleased with her looks.

"Well, let's stow your gear and get going," he said. "The padre's waiting at the mission. It'll take us damn near three hours to get there, so we can't be wasting our time." He handed her the straw suitcase. "You tote this." He turned and picked up the trunk in his heavy arms, kicked the door open and went out to the buckboard. Mary and Will looked at each other.

"I want to thank you for everything," she said in a small, miserable voice. "You too, Mrs. Hawley. You've both been nice."

Mrs. Hawley said, "Stay here if you don't like his looks. You're not obligated to marry him just because of a few letters."

Desperately, Mary said, "I—guess I have to. We made a bargain, and he paid my passage here. Anyway, I think everything will work out fine." Her lips trembled smally as she turned to the door.

Pollack called impatiently, "Come along, come along, girl! You've had a whole day to visit. Now we got to get rolling."

Mrs. Hawley joined Will in the doorway as the buckboard rolled out of the yard. Mary Bess sent a last long look back at them, then looked ahead. Mrs. Hawley's breath exploded. "It ain't right, and I'm ashamed of myself," she muttered. "That girl needs love and laughter, and he'll make a drudge out of her in six months."

"Well, there's nothing we can do about it. It's her problem. She's no kid, so if she wants to get shut of him, it's up to her."

That was a few minutes past noon. At around six, just as Will and Mrs. Hawley were sitting down to supper, the Garcia brothers rode into the yard. They were of the Mexican settlement at the mission, and worked for Pollack during the shearing season. Will knew them and liked them, and they often stopped by the station on their way to town.

Will invited them to eat, and they washed up and sat down with quiet courtesy, their brown eyes warm. They had, they said, decided to look for work at the mills at Contention, and could they spend the night in the barn so that they could get an early start in the morning? Will said sure. "Did Pollack reach the mission by the time you boys left?" he asked.

Pablo, the eldest brother, said, "The mission was closed today, *Senor* Hughes."

"Closed?"

"*Si.* There was no service because the good padre is gone. He left three days ago to make his visits."

Will frowned. He knew that three or

four times a year the padre took a week or so off to visit outlying settlements, but Pollack had said that the padre was waiting at the mission. "Are you sure?" he asked.

"*Si,*" the younger brother said. "*Senor* Pollack, he knows. He was there yesterday to inquire. He knows the good padre is gone."

Mrs. Hawley stared at Will. "Now if that ain't a fine kettle of fish. The man knew all along that the padre was gone. He'll likely take that girl home, and he ain't got the right. He knows it, too. He knows he should've left her here until he could arrange with the padre for them to be decently married."

Will's eyes toughened and his mouth grew hard. He rose without a word and went to his room and took his gun from the bureau drawer, checked it and pushed it under his belt. Mrs. Hawley came to the door, her expression anxious. "Will, what are you up to?"

"If she's at his place I'm bringing her back here."

"You be careful."

Will nodded curtly and went out and saddled his horse. A few minutes later he headed for Pollack's place at a hard run.

IT WAS dusking by the time Will reached the small basin where Pollack's ranch buildings were located. The house was an unpainted structure of clapboard with a rickety porch, there was a slanted barn, two or three rotting sheds, and the yard was cluttered with feed bins. The buckboard was parked near the sagging corral, Mary's trunk still in its bed. Two big dogs were chained to a shed, and they commenced to bark furiously as Will approached. He left his horse ground-tied in the yard; and he turned toward the house as the door opened.

Mary Bess stepped out on the porch and stopped, and Pollack's bulk showed directly behind her. His shirt was open, exposing his hairy chest, and his expression in the furtive light looked cruel enough to rip the wings off a bird.

"What the hell do you want?" he demanded thickly.

"The padre's gone and you knew it when you came after Miss Bess," Will said.

"What about it?"

Will did not answer. He looked at the girl's miserable experssion, and saw that her eyes were large with fright. "You'd better come back to the station with me," he said.

Pollack said roughly, "What the hell makes you think she wants to go there?" He prodded the girl. "Tell him."

"I—guess I'll stay here, Mr. Hughes," she said.

"You can't! The padre won't be back for a week, more'n likely. You can't stay here."

"I don't mind," she said in a firmer tone.

Will stared at her, and a surge of confused anger swept through him. Pollack had already laid the law down to her, he guessed dismally. The man's will had dominated her, made her say what she wouldn't say in her right mind.

"I suppose you know what you're doing," he said harshly.

She didn't answer right away, not until her body stiffened as Pollack prodded her a second time. "Yes," she said, then. "I know what I'm doing."

Pollack gave a short laugh.

"That satisfy you, Hughes?"

It was the way that she stood in front of pollack that answered Will's puzzled question, and brought a squinting grin to his face. He said, "Why not?" and went back to his horse and swung into the saddle and rode away from the house without looking back.

Some fifteen minutes later, he tied the horse in the brush and hurried down the gritty slope, keeping the house between him and the chained dogs. He approached the porch hearing a hoarse burst of laughter. The steps creaked beneath his weight; he took two long strides and slammed the door open and stepped inside and found Mary Bess struggling in Pollack's arms. Pollack's eyes held a flat glitter, they appeared to burst out of his head, making him uglier than he was, as Will came into

the room.

Without a word, without a pause, Will reached the big man, gripped him with one hand and swung him around. His fist cracked against the fleshy jaw. Pollack fell back, roaring, caught his balance and made a jump for the gun that lay on a small shelf. Mary Bess screamed and threw herself at him, nails clawing. Pollack flung her aside with a swift thrust of his arm.

Then Will reached him and hit him twice in the face, deliberately and cruelly, bringing the punches down with terrible, hammering power. He felt the bones of Pollack's nose break under his knuckles, heard Pollack's agonized yelp. The big man backed away, a ghost of fright in his eyes, and Will slugged him in the body, forcing his hands down, and then smashed him on the side of the jaw. Pollack's knees broke then, and he fell on his side, blood trickling from his nose and lips.

Will took the gun from the shelf, went to the door and tossed it into the gathering darkness. He said, "Mary, take your suitcase and wait outside."

Pollack stared at Will, as she obeyed.

But she didn't leave directly. Gripping the suitcase, she looked down at Pollack, and said, "You lied to me, Mr. Pollack. I would have married you and made you a good wife, but you lied to me." Still looking at Pollack, she said to Will, "He said we'd just stop to drop my trunk off. Then when we got here he told me the padre was gone, and that we'd have to wait until next week to be married. I asked him to take me back to the station, but he refused. And when you came, he had the gun, and told me what to say. He said that if I didn't, he'd shoot you."

"I guessed as much," Will said.

"I'm leaving now," she said to Pollack. "I'll try and get a job and pay you back the fare money. I'm sorry, Mr. Pollack, sorry for you."

Pollack licked blood from his lips. Something moved painfully in his eyes and went away.

"You don't need to pay the money back," he said hoarsely.

"You'll get it tomorrow," Will said. "When you bring her trunk to the station tomorrow, you'll get your money." He paused, added softly, "Even though I don't like to deal with skunks, Pollack. You hear me? And if you make anything of this, I'll kill you."

Pollack looked into Will's eyes. "I know it," he said hoarsely.

"Remember it," Will said, and followed Mary Bess out of the house.

THEY rode slowly through the gathering darkness, the suitcase tied to the saddle horn, Mary Bess behind the cantle, her arms gripping Will's waist. He could feel her warm body pressing against his back, and the thought that had been in his mind, a thought that had been confused, now became certain. He said quietly, "A lot of things can happen in a short time under pressure. Things that during normal times take weeks to decide. Do you think you would like it in Colorado, Mary?"

She was silent, he felt her body shaking and knew she was crying. She said, "You're not just sorry for me?"

"That was part of it, but not now. Not after you spoke up to Pollack." It was true, he knew. Had she turned out of the house, had she left without speaking to Pollack, saying what she had to say, he would never have asked her. Sometimes it took only a word or a sign to show how a person was put together.

"We'll have a whole week to get used to the idea," he said. "Give us a chance to talk, to get acquainted with each other."

She did not answer, but her arms tightened around his waist, and he smiled slowly. A week wasn't very long, but it would be long enough for them. He knew that when he left for Colorado that he wouldn't be traveling alone. It was good to think about.

Her eyes on the gunman, Louisa reached out and grabbed Millard's Colt

THE HANGING COLT

By JAMES NORMAN

NOWHERE in the territory has a town had as curious a succession of sheriffs as ours. First, there was Ben Tillman who had himself hanged because he believed the law should be kept. Then came this Tom Millard. We didn't know much about what we were getting when we got him.

Millard wasn't imposing in the way Tillman had been. He was short with a thin face, a little aquiline; the eyes intelligent and hard. He wore a well-cut black coat and breeches of some good material, black cow boots and the unshowy flat-crowned Stetson of a man of middle age. He was past twenty-five, but not much more. Looking at him, you thought he might be a Southerner of good blood, or perhaps a Saint Louis gentleman, that is, until you saw the gun on his thigh. It was a plain black long-barreled Colt with a plain wood grip. He wore it tied down like a draw-fighter—but not like just any draw-fighter.

There weren't many folks in town who saw the gun on him like that. Those of us who did, on that first day, never forgot it. It was like viewing a man in a spy-glass through which, because of some trick of light or momentary distortion, he appeared different, perhaps wilder and more dangerous. And because this glimpse could never be caught in exactly the same way again, you wonder if you saw correctly, yet you never forgot it because it was so starkly revealing.

Like a fool, Millard hung up his gun, because he loved Louisa Downs . . .

It was an afternoon in mid-November when he came to Jenet Wells. There was a skin of snow on the ground and a feel of winter in the wind that wasn't softened by the flickering sunlight. I was on the veranda of the Stockman's House talking with Pat Kern, a big boned, tall, take-your-time kind of man—the oldest cattleman in these parts. It was Kern who first spotted him, up the deserted street where the wind sent a rising sheet of grit-snow against the false front of Turk's saddleshop. He was riding with Willie, our deputy sheriff who didn't want any part of the sheriff job since Ben Tillman's hanging.

Although we were used to Willie, he was still a lot of man. He was over six feet of lean and bone, and he had a pendulous lip like a dewlap. However, when Millard was there you hardly noticed Willie.

Millard was taking his time, letting his horse pick its way along the street. Although cold had hardened the ground, you could see where the wagons had rutted it a week ago and how the teams had slithered and plowed it up. Half way up the street Tom Millard halted before Turk's place and let his horse drink from the trough. He rode a good animal, a blood bay that was deep in barrel and haunch. A horse with plenty of bottom.

They came on toward us and Willie yelled, "The new sheriff is here. Where's Mayor Willoby? Inside?"

Willie dismounted and went inside. The other man tied his horse but stayed on the boardwalk. He nodded to use, yet said nothing, and you got the feeling he was the kind who used his eyes a lot and his mouth very little. He just stood there as though he were listening to the brunting slosh of water in the bay's stomach.

Then Mayor Willoby came out. He was short and plump, a pink man who always wore a baldfaced shirt beneath his frock coat. He had been a lawyer once, and wasn't good for much else than town-running. He shook hands with the new man, then turned, introducing him to us.

"The marshal at Hemet recommended Mr. Millard," Willoby said. "Millard is the man who took Rodock a while ago."

"Rodock?" Kern said. "At Hemet?"

Willoby shook his head. "He took him farther south. Millard was deputy at Snake Bend."

Millard himself didn't say anything, one way or the other. For an instant, when Rodock was mentioned, a strange flicker of alert wildness showed in his eyes, then he turned to scan our half empty village.

Willie was nodding though. If what the mayor had said was only half-true, then Millard must be a good man. Pat Kern, on the other hand, was still sizing the new sheriff up. From his frown you almost knew what he was thinking; why would a young man like Millard want to be a lawdog in a town quiet as Jenet Wells?

A man who had gone after Rodock, even with a posse behind him, had to have a good chunk of wildness in him. It took even more than that, too. He needed a gun-quick hand, one a good deal faster and steadier than Rodock's. Although none of us had ever seen Rodock, there wasn't a man in town who'd fancy meeting him, or who could outdraw him. Rodock was a bad one, full of snake blood.

Kern looked at Millard and finally said, "Why'd you leave Snake Bend? Too quiet for you?"

Millard shrugged. "Just looking for someone," he said.

"Seems like after taking Rodock," Kern said, "a place like Jenet Wells might bear down on a man. He'd become restive." He motioned toward the deserted street, adding, "Not much gunning here. We don't appreciate it."

"Times change," Willie put in.

TIME had indeed changed our town. Once we had our share of violence, even a touch of range war. But now, for over ten years Jenet Wells lay peaceful within the rim of crouched-down mountains that hemmed in the valley. Occasionally the boys coming down from winter range still busted up The Pearl and Godbee's saloons, but there was seldom any shooting. The boys packing hardware

skinned themselves at the edge of town, checking their guns in at the sheriff's office where they picked them up riding out.

Some folks like Herb McGregor, the bald, wizened general store owner, claimed it wasn't right to have so much peace. He argued that a man gets disused to handling a gun, and if trouble were to come his way he might not even remember which drawer he had left his hogleg in. That didn't make much sense if you'd ever seen the short-barreled, top-heavy erratic pistols most of the townsmen favored. They weren't guns for reaching and shooting.

Willie was the only one who had an inkling of why Millard had picked Jenet Wells to settle in. I think he was about to mention it, but suddenly he shut his dewlap mouth and stared up the street at the carriage coming toward us. In the carriage were Parson Downs, his wife and his niece. They were all bundled and looked as chilled as the plain board Union church that Downs served.

The Parson hubbed the carriage near Millard's and Willie's horses. He helped his wife down. They gave us a reserved greeting and disappeared in the Stockman's. Meanwhile the girl sat there looking at us.

It wasn't often we got stared at so steadily by Louisa Downs. A man could pleasure in it, if she were at all free with her glance. But she wasn't the kind of girl who flirted or calicoed around. Though she had only been in town five months, and was staying with Parson Downs and his wife, we liked what we saw—a calm, blue-eyed, graceful thing with a waist so small and trim you could almost crook your finger around it. No one knew much about her, but it was rumored that she had come up from Texas to live with her kin because her father and brothers had been killed in the range war.

Suddenly, without taking leave of us, or as if we had never existed, Millard turned and strode to the girl's carriage. He took off his black hat, and with one hand resting on the buggywhip boot, he stood there smiling up at her. For an instant Louisa stiffened, as though she didn't want to see him. Then the wind brought her voice to us.

"You needn't have followed me, Tom," she said. She still didn't look at him, but stared right up the street, way out where Kern's white house and his spread butts on the town.

"Louisia, I told you, I'm ready to do it your way," Millard said to her.

Instead of glancing down at his face, as you'd expect of a woman, she abruptly looked at his gun. Her expression softened slightly and she said, "I'm glad to see you Tom. But it's no use. I know you haven't changed. You've wasted your time following me."

Millard did a strange thing then. He unbuckled his gunbelt, rolled it around the holstered Colt and laid it like an offering on the floorboard of the carriage. Louisia pulled her foot back slightly, then shook her head.

"No, Tom," she said quietly, firmly. "I won't believe it. You've lived by the gun. It's a part of you. There'll come a time when you think you'll need it, and you'll go for it. Men don't live down their nature."

At this moment Parson Downs and his wife came outside. There was more talk by the carriage which we didn't catch. Finally Downs took the gun and gunbelt, handling it gingerly as though it were something sinful, and gave it back to Millard. As the carriage drove away the girl turned to look back. She didn't seem as stiff and full of righteousness as when she had been talking with Millard, instead, she looked wilted and unhappy.

Willie gave an abrupt sigh. "I'll be darned," he said. "That's why he was asking about her when he came to the jail office. Now maybe he don't want the star totin' job."

We watched Millard staring after the carriage and kind of weighing the belt and gun in his hand. Then he returned to us and told Willie to fetch him a hammer and nail. What Millard did next became the talk of Jenet Wells and pretty far

beyond. He wacked the nail into the porch post of the hotel and he hung his gun there.

From the looks of Millard you got the impression that he was fast with a gun, and perhaps had a touch of the devil in his nature. Maybe he had killed men, as some folks said. When a man grows like this, he isn't ever safe without his gun. There's always someone just ornery enough, and blowed up enough, to want to match him.

Maybe it was a good thing he came to Jenet Wells. In our town a man could feel pretty safe pegging his shooting irons to a porch post in order to prove to his girl he was riding a peaceful trail. The gesture was one that some people might have laughed over—if you could laugh at a man like Millard.

But a moment later, Pat Kern made it so that no one could laugh. He had watched the scene with the girl and the hanging of the gun. Now he shook his head.

"Better take it back, young man," he said.

Millard looked at him questioningly.

"The stage came in an hour ago with some news from Snake Bend," Kern said. "Rodock has escaped from jail. Guess they don't get to hang him."

Again there was that flicker in Millard's eyes before they turned hard and uninterested. He nodded to Kern, saying, "I'm obliged. But I know it."

THAT gun, hanging there, did something to Jenet Wells. We were caught by it, cruelly fascinated, as if by a thing crucified.

Some were scared. A rumor got about that Rodock had sworn to come after our new sheriff. No one wanted a gunman with Rodock's reputation in our town. There was talk of making Millard sack his saddle and clear out of the valley. A few folks even murmured about sending Louisa Downs away, for wasn't she to blame?

But there were others like Heb McGregor who seemed to be spoiling for excitement. It was McGregor who constructed a little peaked roof of shingles above the hanging Colt to protect it from the elements. And it was also McGregor who saw to it that the gun was kept oiled and polished and in working order from the time Millard hung it to the moment it was finally taken down.

After a few days it stood clear that Millard wasn't leaving town, nor was Rodock coming for him. The weather was on our sheriff's side for a blizzard closed the mountain passes, even though we didn't get much snow in the valley. So we soon got used to having Millard with us. He wasn't the kind of man you got to know well; he was fenced-away and didn't talk much.

Yet he was serious about his job. You'd see him going about his rounds, stopping it at The Pearl and Godbee's and the Stockman's House. Though there was no need to in Jenet Wells, he always walked down the middle of the streets—gunman's alley. We knew it was a habit he couldn't shake, much the same as you'd sometimes see him absently rubbing his right thigh like a man feeling for something that isn't there.

As winter passed over us, folks put Rodock out of mind, and in place, begin worrying whether Miss Louisa might ever soften toward Millard. People took sides; those saying she should, and them that said she shouldn't. To a lot of us, it seemed she ought to, just to get away from her uncle. She was too sweet a girl to grow up raised on prunes and proverbs. Maybe she might have softened, if that gun hadn't hung there taunting-like, and if a cowboy named Hoskins hadn't decided to bust up the town.

The weather had begun to break and the valley wasn't far from greening up. Hoskins was among the first of the riders to come down from winter range. He was a big-boned, freckle-faced grudgy sort of drinker. Somehow he got into The Pearl with his gun on and pretty soon he was boozed up and in a sod pawing mood. He started shooting windows.

We saw Sheriff Millard hurry up the street, unarmed as usual. When he en-

tered the saloon there were several men cornered in the place, hoping Hoskins would forget them. Millard paid no attention to them nor to the cowboy. He strode to the bar behind which Tim Cahill, an old stoved-up cowbody who used to ride for Kern, worked as bardog. He asked if he had a pistol and belt.

Cahill nodded cautiously, and without taking his eyes off of Hoskins.

"Push it to me," Millard said quietly.

The barman hesitated, then lifted his gun and belt from beneath the bar. Millard broke the pistol, removed all but one cartridge and dumped them upon the bar like dice. He slowly buckled on the belt, then while easing the gun into the holster, he glanced at Cahill.

"You got a fifty-cent piece, Tim? Let me see it," he asked.

The bartender pushed the coin toward him. As yet, Millard hadn't so much as flicked a look at the wild cowboy. But he had the man hooked. Hoskins was watching and losing his wildness. The sheriff held the silver coin up to eyelevel as though it were a monocle to look through. Suddenly he let the coin drop from his fingers. Instead of trying to catch it, and before the twirling silver had fallen to belt-level, his hand snapped down in a blur that reached the gun from its holster and fired. The coin spun away.

Hoskins' eyes narrowed as though he were trying to get a hold on himself. His tongue came out and wet his heavy lips. Hoskins wasn't the only one awed. It was the fastest hip-shooting anyone had ever seen in Jenet Wells. And naturally, the cowboy peeled. That was all there was to it.

THE next day the bullet-bent half dollar appeared on the hotel post, nailed right under Millard's Colt. Perhaps if it hadn't been put there to further remind folks of the gun that had hung there all through the winter we might have felt easier about Millard. And Louisa Downs, herself, might have softened toward him.

But after the incident in The Pearl we began to stiffen toward Millard. Our uneasiness was summed up best by Miss Downs who had begun to let Millard visit her at the pastor's house. After the half-dollar shooting he came around as usual and was met at the front steps but allowed to go no farther.

"Of \course, Tom," Louisa addressed him with bitterness, "You didn't use your own gun, nor did you shoot anyone. But you did need a gun to prove what you could do."

He shook his head. "You can't just wipe out all the guns in the world," he said. "A gun represents the law, too. A man doesn't have to be all horns and rattle to wear one."

She squared her tiny shoulders and her resolve was firmer than ever. "Did you have to become the sheriff?" she demanded angrily.

"It's work, Louisa. It's a job that needs doing."

"No. You took it because you can't bear to be apart from violence. You invite it to come to you."

"There's nothing violent about Jenet Wells," he replied.

Millard was wrong. A week later two things happened that made us think we had slipped back thirty years, back to the days before the law had come to Jenet Wells. There had been several days of soft, almost warm weather that hollowed out the snow and opened the mountain passes. Some restless men took advantage of this and rustled away forty head of Pat Kern's cattle. A posse was quickly gotten up. Millard, unarmed, and most of the able men in town rode out on the trail. The posse was gone for three days. On the same day that the men left, Rodock came to Jenet Wells.

When Rodock rode in no one had to be told who he was. He was on a powerful black gelding that had a fancy saddle with a Cheyenne roll. He rode in an easy, relaxed way; a lean, not too big man with black tell-you-nothing eyes and a habitual alertness that sent a sudden chill through a man.

Willie, our deputy, saw him first. Although he knew who Rodock was, he had

a sense of duty and he called Rodock on carrying a gun into town. The gunman shot Willie dead, then coldly stepped his horse over him and rode on to The Pearl. That was the beginning of the terror in Jenet Wells.

There was hardly anyone in The Pearl. Rodock had a drink, coldly eyed Tim Cahill and one other customer. But before he went out he learned about Millard's Colt hanging from the post across the way at the Stockman's House. Then he told Cahill and the customer that he had come for Millard. He spoke in an edged, bitter voice, saying that if anyone tried to help Millard, no matter how, he'd shoot them as he had Willie.

Then he went out and rode to the sheriff's office at the edge of town. He built himself a fire in the iron stove and settled in, perhaps sitting and staring at the "wanted" poster with his likeness on it.

Twice during the afternoon we saw him come out and ride through the town, a black figure like someone riding under the cloak of death. A bleak wind and a chill went with him. The town looked as though it was dead. You wouldn't have known there was anyone within the houses set back under the flickering cottonwoods. The plain board houses along the main and cross streets, and the fancier ones with gimcracks around the veranda looked as abandoned as though they were in a ghost town. Rodock could have been the only inhabitant.

Perhaps someone thought of shooting him from a window. It could have been done, but no one did it. Maybe it was because no one fancied shooting a man in the back, no matter how bad he was. Or, perhaps it was because no one really had much feeling for Millard, either. In any event no one dry-gulched Rodock. To try it and fail would have invited trouble no one wanted. When he passed through the streets his alertness was such, folks were sure he was waiting for something just like that.

At the Stockman's House where Louisa Downs had been caught when Rodock ap-

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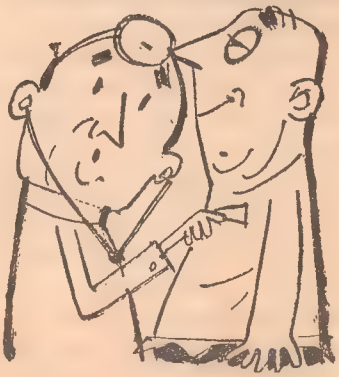

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peared in town, the girl argued that someone must warn Millard and the men on posse. Mayor Willoby refused to go. Heb McGregor, despite all his talk, was cold-footed. No one except Eakins, the Negro handyman, was willing to try it. Eakins was killed at five o'clock. Since no one in town could match guns with Rodock our only hope was that Millard and the posse would come back as a body and not scatter out to their various ranches and homes. We didn't know, of course, that Sheriff Millard was coming back alone.

EVEN before Millard's posse had picked up a sign of the rustlers the sheriff's big red bay had stepped into a doghole and had crippled on him. The posse went on under Kern while Millard turned back to town. Although he reached Jenet Wells after midnight he must have sensed trouble. Undoubtedly there was the smell of it in the forbidding wind that laced through the darkened and deserted streets.

When he reached Godbee's place he turned off of the main street, dismounted and walked out toward his dobie office and the jail. When he was almost there a voice addressed him in the darkness, stopping him.

"Who is it?" Millard asked.

"Rodock."

Millard's voice carried no note of surprise. He said, "I've been expecting you."

"You gave me no time," Rodock said bitterly. "You and your posse took me while I slept. I'm giving you none, now."

Millard didn't answer. He tried to position the other. Then suddenly there was a stab of fire in the night and the gunshot. Millard was thrown back abruptly by the lead that tore the flesh of his right leg. As he fell back against the wall of a building he recovered instantly and lurched around the corner. He paused, listening, placing Rodock's movement. He felt his thigh. There was numbness, like the cold of the night, but little pain.

Now he began inching back, retreating silently through the empty streets and lanes, hugging building walls, carefully crossing boardwalks. Rodock followed him cautiously, stalking cat-like in the night. Although gunless, Millard had one advantage—he knew Jenet Wells and to locate him in it was like hunting for a whisper in a wind.

During those small hours of the night no one in town saw either of these men. We just sensed and felt when they passed close by. For a while there was no sign at all; then there was a single shot, and another a spell later. The second gunshot came from near the Stockman's House and it told us a great deal. Millard was trying to get to his gun, hanging from the veranda post of the hotel, and Rodock, knowing the Colt was there, used it as a kind of cruel bait.

Millard could have taken refuge in one of our houses, that is, if there had been a door unlocked. But he made no such move. Perhaps he holed up in a storm-cellar somewhere to husband his strength, but he didn't hide out long because toward dawn he and Rodock were prowling the streets again.

When daylight began to enamel the deserted streets with a bleak, fretful light, those of us who had a view of the front of the long sagging Stockman's house with its double-decker porch and the veranda posts saw that the Colt was still hanging there. A short distance beyond, we saw Rodock waiting and we knew Millard was still in town. Rodock was in the dead center of the street, turning every now and then, watching the doorways, the lanes, the alcoves and porches.

Even after the long night his alertness reached out everywhere like a dangerous thing. Seeing Rodock there made us think differently of Millard. Anyone else would have already abandoned the town, taking to the willows until his chances were better. Now, we no longer thought of Millard as a fenced-away-man, apart and not town-settled like ourselves.

We began to understand that he had stayed through the night, keeping Rodock's attention pinned down—not out of wildness or love of danger—but because he was our sheriff. He was thinking of the town, and perhaps the girl, too.

Suddenly a strange scene occurred. Mil-

lard limped out from behind The Pearl, showing himself and walking toward Rodock. He was still without a gun. It was a crazy move, until you understood.

Rodock hadn't seen the sheriff at first. He had turned to look toward the door of the Stockman's House. Louisa Downs had come out upon the porch and walked to the post where Millard's Colt was hung. She took the gun down.

Perhaps Rodock didn't realize she was a woman, or maybe he did. In any event, he moved for his gun.

"Rodock!" Millard called abruptly.

The gunman whirled suddenly, drawing and crouching in the same instant. He fired, but before he fired there was another shot. We saw him jerk up, then fall on the frozen street. On the hotel porch Luoisa Downs held the smoking Colt with both hands. She raised her glance from the pistol, staring out toward the man lying dead in the street. Her face was pale and tormented, almost as if she refused to believe she had shot Rodock. It was a good shot for a woman who hated guns.

When it was over she didn't hang the gun back upon the post as some people claim she did. Because of the excitement no one really paid much heed to what she did with Millard's weapon. Nor did she stay in Jenet Wells long enough to let us know how she felt, now, about firearms. I was one of those who saw her when she left town on the stage later that day.

Millard carried her things. When he helped her in, then got in after her, we noticed that he was again wearing his gunbelt and the Colt.

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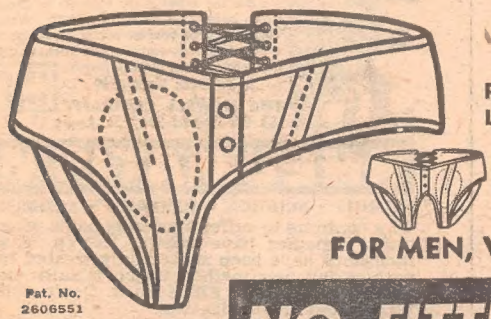

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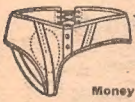

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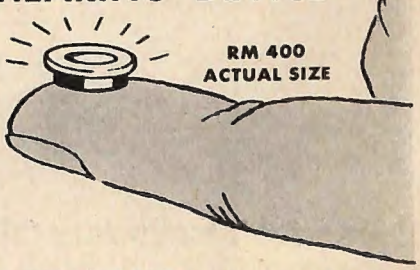

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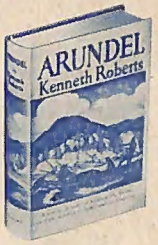

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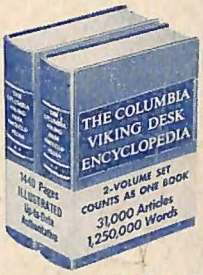

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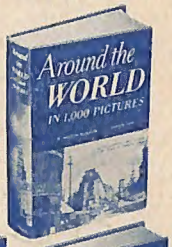

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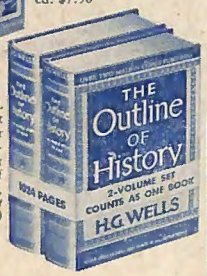

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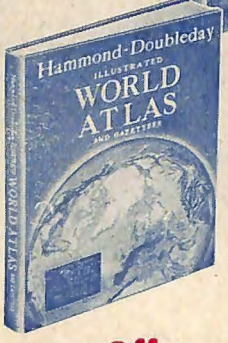

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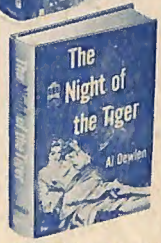

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